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# Hair Trigger 26

Columbia College Chicago

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# Hair Trigger 26

A STORY WORKSHOP ANTHOLOGY

COLUMBIA COLLEGE CHICAGO



# HairTrigger 26

A STORY WORKSHOP ANTHOLOGY

COLUMBIA COLLEGE CHICAGO

CHICAGO 2004

FICTION WRITING DEPARTMENT

600 SOUTH MICHIGAN AVENUE

CHICAGO, ILLINOIS 60605-1996



Cover Photograph

Paul D'Amato, Untitled, 2003, from *Lake Street L Project*

Paul D'Amato ©2003

*Hair Trigger 26*

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#### **THE DAVID FRIEDMAN MEMORIAL AWARD**

The David Friedman Award offers a cash prize to the best story or essay published in *Hair Trigger* each year. Our thanks go to David Friedman's family, which established this fund in fall 2002 as a memorial to their son, a talented writer and painter, as well as an alumnus of Columbia College Chicago and a great friend to the Fiction Writing Department's students and faculty.

## Preface & Acknowledgments

WE ARE VERY HAPPY TO BRING YOU THE TWENTY-SIXTH ISSUE OF *HAIR TRIGGER*, THE Columbia College Chicago Fiction Writing Department's anthology of writing. Over its long history, *Hair Trigger* has won numerous awards, including first-place prizes in national competitions from three different organizations: Association of Writers and Writing Programs, the Coordinating Council of Literary Magazines, and the Columbia University Scholastic Press Association. Those of us associated with the Fiction Writing Department are, of course, very proud of the students whose work has been introduced through *Hair Trigger*. Many of them have won individual awards from these national organizations and have gone on to successful careers in writing, publishing, and a variety of other professions.

As with previous issues of the magazine, *Hair Trigger 26* collects prose fiction and creative nonfiction writing by undergraduate and graduate students at all levels. These works come primarily from core classes—Introduction to Fiction Writing, Fiction Writing I, Fiction Writing II, Prose Forms, Advanced Fiction, Advanced Prose Forms—taught using the innovative Story Workshop® approach, as well as from Fiction Seminars, Critical Reading and Writing classes, and a wide variety of creative nonfiction, genre, publishing, and other Specialty Writing courses taught using distinctly successful complementary approaches. The success of the Story Workshop approach and those complementary approaches used in the Fiction Writing Department program is reflected in the broad range of voices, subjects, forms, and cultural/linguistic backgrounds represented in all editions of *Hair Trigger* during its illustrious history, including the edition that you are holding in your hands.

An exhaustive and rigorous selection process is used with *Hair Trigger* to ensure that no excellent story—whatever its voice, subject, or approach—will be overlooked. Student editors in our College Literary Publications class work over a semester with a faculty advisor who helps them reveal their unconscious as well as conscious biases. These editors, formed into two diverse teams, read submissions and decide which should be passed along to the full group. Those manuscripts passed ahead in the process are read by all editors, who then begin the hard work of discussing which pieces should go into the final book. Instructors may appeal a rejected piece for another reading and discussion by student editors who, in conjunction with the advisor, are responsible for making the final decisions. For space reasons, we are unable to include many excellent stories and essays each year; but over the maga-

zine's history, this thorough, fair process has ensured that the best of the best will eventually see the light of day. Respect for the reader, for content, for form, for point of view and language, and vividness of telling characterize the selections printed in this volume; and we believe that the diversity represented in the pages of *Hair Trigger* stands as a distinct and refreshing contrast to the so-called "workshop story" found in many other writing programs. Our appreciation goes to the student editors, chosen for their own ability as writers and readers.

*Hair Trigger* 26 and the various editions of *The Best of Hair Trigger* descend from a bloodline that includes such widely acclaimed anthologies as *The Story Workshop Reader*, *Angels in My Oven*, *It Never Stopped Raining*, and *Don't You Know There's a War On?* The Fiction Writing Department is also presently home to the nationally distributed journal *F Magazine*, as well as the highly regarded science fiction journal, *Spec-Lit*.

Congratulations to Chris Maul Rice, who was chiefly responsible as Faculty Advisor for supervising undergraduate and graduate student editors in the overall selection and production process for *Hair Trigger* 26, and to Coordinator of Faculty Development Shawn Shiflett, who oversees *Hair Trigger* for the Fiction Writing Department.

Thanks to Andrew Allegetti, Don Gennaro De Grazia, Ann Hemenway, Gary Johnson, Antonia Logue, Eric May, Patricia Ann McNair, Alexis Pride, Shawn Shiflett, Joe Meno, John Schultz, and Betty Shiflett for consulting on matters affecting the student editors' complex editorial selection process—as well as to the many other excellent teacher-writers in the Fiction Writing program.

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Our profound gratitude goes to Warrick Carter, President of Columbia College



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And we owe a debt, above all, to the over 550 students registered for classes in the Fiction Writing Department each semester, each of whom played a part in the coming-to-fruit of the stories and essays published in this volume.

We are proud of the writers who appear in *Hair Trigger 26*, and we know that you will enjoy the original and inventive work appearing in these pages.

Randall Albers, Chair  
Fiction Writing Department

***Hair Trigger 26 Student Editors***

Vanessa Angone  
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Chris Maul Rice

Our special thanks go to Columbia College Chicago  
Photography Department faculty member Paul D'Amato  
for all photographs appearing in *Hair Trigger 26*.

# Reach

Chris McCann

RIGHT ON THE BIRTH OF DAWN WHEN THE CREPE-PAPER MOON GETS GONE, Cecily always imagined him ghost-stepping home to her. Right in that fissure when it wasn't tomorrow and wasn't today, she'd trick herself into lightly pressing her ear against the door to hear Marvin jangle his keys on the other side, but when she'd throw it open there would be nothing but the damp stairwell to swallow her. Then she'd begin to imagine a day when he would come home every day after work with take-out cartons of chop suey, when she'd rub the knots out of his neck before they went to bed, when they'd make love every night with their eyes open, the light bulb over the bed glowing auburn and dim, when she wouldn't be alone like this, waiting for him, and when he'd give up that damn horn. He'd throw it out the window and never speak of it again. No more Fat Man or Calico, no more Mose or Stick, no more of that band. He'd quit The Scraps and all those people, and he'd stop boozing, too. He'd drink turpentine, that man, and it'd damn near kill him, burning up all his insides and drying up his head—and what would he do the next morning after he gagged in the sink? He'd go back for more. He'd drench that swollen tongue until it wept.

Why check the clock on the bedstand because she could feel every second

creep over the room with the weight of a hammer onto bedrock? She pulled a chair over to the window and crossed her legs, resting one forearm on the sill. She looked out past the rooftop laundry ropes and kettledrum water towers, past the rust-colored brick chimneys and the electrical lines. Far away where the sky met the city, the air was aglow with that eerie purple mystery that is the distant light of the dawn. Seven stories down, the stoop of the building was empty. Was she the only one awake? Was there no one at all who could meet her gaze? She realized that night was over and she was still alone. She heard the wind whine through the fire escapes, those blackened skeletons that cling to all brick. The streetlights colored it all with a hollow yellow glaze. Right here, right now, if she were to close her eyes, would all this slip away? Moments like these, she understood, you could be dreaming that bare-bones street, that pink-pongee sky, that faint spray of dew that could've leaked from a baby's squinting eye. You could be lying in bed with Marvin, the insides of your thighs still moist, the sheet pulled up and your faces close together. When you wake up everything will be different; you'll see, Cecily. She was drifting off now, her chin propped in the palm of her hand. Goodbye, Cecily, gently fall away knowing everything will be better tomorrow, yes it will, and those footsteps will disappear, the footsteps you hear right now, down there, don't you, Cecily? Footsteps? Where? Listen! Listen, shh . . .

The man had a walk that could teach a thunderhead to shout the Chi blues. Each day he spent ten hours drilling holes into sheet metal with a monstrous drill press, then each night he'd be on the stands with his band in the stretch called the Corridor—(If the city is a pan-fired steak, picture the gristle on the other side of the bone.)—until the Earth had rotated around the sun and his life was torn down the center an inch more.

He sat down on the stoop and thrust a hand through his hair. Marvin's lips felt like they were stuffed with TNT, because the music was still in his mouth. If he was to crack his knuckles his hands would combust, because his fingers were fireworks. To open his mouth would be to blast off that brass scream which she wouldn't understand, but at least he made it to the stoop. Usually he would crash on a couch in the Corridor, but tonight an image lit in his mind of a column of sunlight striking across her belly on a lost morning that always made him hunger for her. But now that he'd arrived—and she was peering down at him, her head stuck out the window—all he wanted was one last drink.

Cecily had never felt so invisible. She tried to send her thoughts down to him as she watched. Please, Marvin. Come up to me. Look up, meet my gaze, and rush to see me. Run up the stairs, bound up them, leave that trombone sit-



ting on the stoop. Don't go back there, Marvin, because tonight I am up here watching you.

Might be a jam session in the backroom of The Scraps or the basement of The Blue Domino. Yeah. Maybe something he could get into. His body was sore and he hadn't been home in days, but he was already rocking back and forth now that it was calling his name. His horn was pleading with him, begging him for more. It was all he needed to hear. He propped the case in front of him and groaned as he stood up. He hefted it in his hand and glanced at the front door. Tomorrow, he said to himself, and walked off. Cecily watched him go until he disappeared, feeling that numbness settle in. She pulled her head inside and shut the window, drawing the shade just as the morning announced itself in the east. She curled up in bed and shut her eyes against the empty apartment. She was just waiting for some break, and maybe it would come the next day or the next, just wait for tomorrow.

The next night Marvin smoked against a streetlamp and watched Cecily close down Coot's Diner across the street. She moved wearily in the shut-down darkness with a rag tossed down over her shoulder. He looked at himself in a moment of hesitation: the glen plaid number he was wed in barely fit him anymore, and the shiny black shoes felt like bricks on his feet. Throw him in the river now and he'd spend eternity with gaggles of whiskered catfish. He shrugged against the wind and crossed the street as Cecily went to the door with her purse. She locked it with her back to him; he could already smell that rosy-smoke soap that was forever between her breasts and behind her ears. Before he could touch her arm she whipped around to find him there.

Her eyes were little scullery fires. They flared through strands of choppy hair that hung in her face.

"I think I've seen a ghost . . .," Cecily said.

"I wanted to watch you."

". . . or maybe that's just my husband."

"That's right. Nothing to be scared of."

"Is that so?"

Marvin felt as though she were pulling off her skin with her eyes. Give him a cane and a top hat and he'd waltz to calliope music in weird deserted graveyards. Her skin—why so smooth, so olive? Why must her beauty reduce him to a pile of ashes? She was incandescent, a web of hot, sticky wires.

"Well," she pulled her purse up on her shoulder, "what do you want?"

"Dinner and a movie and a malt. Then your fingers in my mouth."

Cecily wanted to slap him, then drag him down onto the sidewalk so they

could just lie there awhile. All she wanted was the guarantee of his rustled breathing on the pillow next to her. All he wanted was to cut out his tongue and present it to her as a gift of reconciliation.

“Try walking me home instead.” Then she took his arm and they started down the street.

Marv thought this meant everything was copacetic. “Do you want to stop for a drink somewhere?”

“I saw you sit on the stoop last night.” Her eyes stared into the middle distance, unfocused, orange jewels gleaming like pilot lights. “I watched you come sit and then walk off. I thought, ‘Where is he going?’ but then I realized I didn’t care anymore.” She stepped faster. “I don’t think you have any idea what you’re doing.” She turned to him suddenly, but he could not face her.

“Do you have any clue, Marvin?”

“I love you more than life itself.”

She ripped her arm out of his. He trailed behind her, one hand stretched out in front of him. She was right. He was a ghost to her; he was less than zero. But Marvin had no way of seeing she wanted none of this, that her desperation had formed a beam of light that could utterly destroy him or heat his bones so the marrow boiled.

He ran up to her and tried to grasp her hand. “OK, fine. Don’t believe me. I give you no reason to. I understand that, but wait a second. Just let me look,” he saw they were approaching their stoop and felt his heart seize, “just let me look at you.”

The stoop was in front of them, and Cecily was running up it. She wrestled with the doorknob and stepped into the foyer. Marvin was motionless in his stiff black shoes. Then she had the key in the lock of the second door; the first door: BANG.

He was the only man on Earth. Lactic haze from a streetlight went right into his veins like a nightmare drip. Through the glass he saw her ass move in her skirt, heard her heels clack as she dashed up the steps. He felt that the connection between his mind and mouth was clipped; he was unable to say the right thing if his life depended on it—which it did, because the depths into which he was falling had no bottom. He yanked his hair up from his head and shut his eyes against the sky that held a zillion unseeable stars past the cloud streams. Why was he unable to pick up the pieces of his own undoing? BANG, slammed in his face, and he was left out with the old iron fences, elevated tracks, and wild dogs that looted the alleys. Marvin ripped off his shoes and threw them at the building across the street. Then he was about to scream

louder and longer than the street had ever heard, when he felt a shining from above him. It was subtle, just a tiny radiance, but before he looked up, he knew it was Cecily watching him.

They stared at each other with unheard words flowing between them as if they held two soup cans connected by a string. It was one of those seconds that turns into a lifetime, when everything is passing before their eyes like a silent school of moonlit fish, when everything is drenched in pure, effortless grace.

When her head disappeared from the window Marv started for the stairs. He went through the second door and hit the steps lunging. He grabbed at the air in front of him, throwing himself, hurling himself up there, leaping up the stairs then swiveling on the landings.

Cecily unbuttoned her new blouse. She was standing on a worn red rug in her bare feet, a thin anklet sparkling in the night shade. The bare lightbulb above the bed cast part of her face in shadow. Her blouse was unbuttoned and hanging out, her arms lay calmly at her sides. Then she stepped forward and the room tilted. She tore the coat down Marv's shoulders, and it fell to the floor, then her blouse, then his pants to his ankles, then her skirt, then the sheets. That night he heard Cecily sing arpeggios. To him it was all music.

When he awoke it was afternoon and fingertips stroked the rim of his ear, ran down his cheek like the touch of spider silk.

"I've got to go now." Cecily was sitting on the edge of the bed. "I'm late for work." Her short hair was pulled back with shiny silver snaps. The sunlight glinted off them as she plucked a stray pillow feather from Marv's eyelash. "Coot wants me to work a double today, so I won't be home until late tonight."

Despite having had a full night's rest, sleep still crowded his head like wads of wool. "What day is today?"

Cecily laughed. "It's Saturday, Marv. You must live in a dream! I think I hear birds. The newsboy on the corner has been calling since six this morning." A breeze blew through the curtain on the other side of the room. Cecily looked out the window. The sun made her eyes into molten steel.

"You'll be home when I get home, won't you?"

"After last night I can't leave this bed."

"Won't you?"

Marv propped himself up on his elbow and gently pulled her close by her collar. She wore such a sharp, concentrated expression that Marv felt his chest tighten. He knew his better judgement would snarl when she closed the door behind her, but what was good judgment when her tooth marks dotted his belly?

"Of course I will." He swore to himself inside his head and a line of cuss



words lit up like a movie marquee. All that mattered was his poker face.

She paused to consider this, but the ticking of her watch distracted her. She rose, saying, "We'll see, won't we?"

"You will indeed."

He got up and kissed her on the mouth because he felt like the heel of all heels. An image flashed in his mind of quaffing bubbly with the devil while soaking in a hot tub in hell. Cecily shut the door smiling at his bare ass.

The room was so dusky hot that the sweat rolled off his chin like beads of mercury. He nursed a beer at the small table in the center of the room, tapping his finger rhythmically on his cigarette. The facts were a belly dancer gyrating her hips before him; at ten he was set to play at The Scraps. His feet pounded the floor in a rhythm. The brass voice was calling him from the closet; now that he heard it, it wouldn't quit—Reach, Marv, reach, reach, Marv, reach—the room spun like he was the sun. He wiped his forehead and shook the silvery sweat off his fingers. Too late. He was up now, wrenching open the closet door. After he laid the case on the bed he pressed his face to the chilled metal surface.

Marv's face was a sweaty raspberry pressed against the mouth of his trombone that shone in the club, dark like pirate's gold. The man had his back arched, his feet planted wide, plunging out this tragic blue line that nearly busted windshields all down the block. The Scraps was a kiln and everybody fired in clouds of gauzy smoke, here and there the shine of an earring or cuff link in the red stage glow. He could sense their rippling faces beneath him as waves of energy cascaded over upturned mouths. Marv was blowing like an astronaut with angel's wings, and the band was no less than stratospheric.

He staggered back; onyx black hair fell in his face, his blood coursed as octane loops in his body, his lungs felt like sacks of hot coal; they watched him shove the slide around, corkscrewing notes that made them shake their heads because they could not believe it. Firecracker exclamations burst out of his belly so the band curled round him, coiled like a rattlesnake on the low stage in the corner. Voices hollered at him, *Reach for it, Marv! Reach! Reach!* So Marv answered back with staccato goose honks (*Palooga Palooga* three times, fast). Then he folded himself up and cat-yawned until his lungs topped off and he heard Stick ribbing with that *Tum tam tum tum Bum ba bum bum*, but fast like heavy machine-gun fire. Marv realized that not a damn thing could be done but to hit a high note that would stop everything, because there was Fat Man with his knotty hands on his knees, tenor swinging from his neck like a bloated fishhook. Mose composed sonic haikus on the gravy wood bass, chicken legs

almost wrapped around it, fingers squiggling on the strings. Calico was at the upright piano with raggy strides that rambled off like casino lights. His left hand hopped, then hit up and down the warped ivory keys. So he brought up the slide, clamped shut his eyes, and hit.

So he held it.

And he held it.

My God, he held it more.

Hear it as you see him up there redeeming his right to live, like a locomotive whistle, baby wail, sun-spot pop that skimmed 'round the summit of a rattlettrap volcano.

Mose brought down the tempo to create a cradle for the empurpled man to fall into. Stick followed suit but still said home-run cracks and rim shots and cymbal crash. They all stared at Marvin. And everything, everything in the entire place, went way down low. Mose and Stick went so slow. See the man collapse on stage, his trombone falling from his hands. All of their hearts were suspended for a beat, then Marv smiled to the people and felt a comet run through him whose reach we will never know.

They knocked back into that royal fight song that swung so far in swallows of blue, everyone tingled in the roots of their hair. Their palms stung from clapping, teeth buzzed from whistling, they were bound together craving for more. Fat Man stood behind Marvin and hoisted him up, patting his forehead with a paisley rag. Hands pumped up in the air, feet scuff-danced between cocktail tables in front of the stage, and the red brick walls shook. Marv sank to the back of the stage near Stick and saw the ruby haze envelop Fat Man, who gassed the diesel engine that was his gut blasting hurricanes up his throat that almost splintered the sax reed. The shock made them howl with wonder and take hold of each other as Fat Man got submerged in the chaos of it, his bald head swathed in magenta hues. Calico was bent over nearly playing his nose, and Stick was a prizefighter pounding for sweet victory. They squirmed when Fat Man tore apart the high register, clearly kamikaze in his seersucker suit, solo gargantuan, and they sure shouted loud when his eyes rolled back like slot-machine scores. When Marv knew it was right he stepped up beside Fat Man, put his horn to his mouth, and the quintet bowed out after a crescendo that felled the stars, sending them caroming down onto the roof like holy hail.

Amid rolling cacophonies of applause, the band pushed toward the long mahogany bar. The crowd converged on them like a colony of fire ants slapping their backs and kissing their cheeks. A bowlegged barkeep whipped down draft levers and flipped up whisky bottles as everyone shouted at him for

rounds galore. Marv squeezed up to the brass rail and there was a whisky rocks. Then it was toast to the band with hands held high, bravo echoes still rippling through the crowd, but Marv held the cold glass to his cheek and kept his eyes closed. He wanted to fall to his knees and throw his hands to the sky, but the juke was fired up and tables were being cleared for a dance floor. All he could do was sink his face into his palms. As soon as the couples were on the floor he was out the door with his horn, out into the muggy toast night. He kept his hands at his sides, eyes straight ahead, stepped down the curb, and walked right out into the traffic on Cass Street.

His feet thumped and tires screeched and rubber got black burnt. High beams separated into starfish light and pulsed against his slick face. Then the symphony of horns that went in one ear and out the other and left everything in between in smithereens. Burnt tires rose in smoke patterns off the hot concrete. He jounced across the lane markers as the car on his left rocked back on its shocks, the car on his right cranking the brakes, the driver gut punching the horn. He reached the curb, and traffic resumed, and cuss words showered from open windows. His band must have followed him out, because there they were, falling all over each other.

“Who needs crosswalks?”

“Where you going, Marv?”

“Marv’s a streetwalking stuntman!”

“Helluva set tonight, Marv.”

“When we’re up, we’re up.”

“I think Marv’s gone deaf. Why ain’t you talking, Marv?”

Marv couldn’t speak. The sight had him in a trance: those men who live on bandstands and in bars, out in alleys, hang on streetcorners, diner dawn, snooze in strange women’s sheets. You, Marv, you. You, too. They all stand back looking at you.

Marv cleared the cotton from his throat and spoke. “You can bet your bottom dollar I’ll be there. Hell’d freeze over before I’d miss it.”

Then they waved or tipped chins and shuffled back inside. Calico was the last to go, and when he got to the door he pointed to Marv and said, “You keep blowing your horn like that and we’ll be the kings of this city.”

Marv nodded. Yes, they would.

When he got to their building and up the seven flights, he packed a small suitcase with all he owned. He looked around the tiny place as if to say goodbye but instead left his key on the table, picked up his horn, and went down to the stoop to wait for Cecily.

Soon he saw her. Under her eyes were pools of murk. He picked up his things and started toward her. She looked up and stopped still. Marvin approached her slowly and said, "I'm going now." His heart beat twice in his chest, and he walked past her. He spoke the words she never wanted to believe she'd hear, betting hope against hope for that break that would never come tomorrow, but today.



# Chance of a Lifetime

Christina Dolinar

ON THE DAY THE MAN IN THE GREEN SHIRT FIRST NOTICED HER, AMANDA Morris had been thinking about love. She'd spent a lazy Sunday afternoon working on her tan at Oak Street Beach, a stretch of sand separating the grand towers of Chicago's Gold Coast from Lake Michigan. A friend was supposed to come with her but changed her mind at the last minute. It was the first time Amanda had been to the city by herself, and the experience left her feeling old and self-assured. All day her thoughts centered on all the boys she loved: rough and bossy Alex Taylor with deep, hard kisses that made her feel owned; sweet and quiet Danny Reynolds with eyes so sad they made her want to cry. Tom Pratt made her laugh, and Sam Carver got her high. She loved them all. At almost fifteen, she kept it at kissing and touching, mostly, but that alone was enough to leave her feeling breathless and wishing it would never end. Her body would swell, her head would spin, and a rush would come over her so powerful that she thought she would faint. She asked her mom once how she would know when it was really love and not something else, and her mom just rolled her eyes. "That's the problem," she said. "You won't."

By late afternoon the sun had dropped behind the high-rises casting giant shadows on the beach. The crowd had thinned and Amanda was packing her

things when he approached her. He looked overdressed for the beach in his perfectly pressed tan pants and mint green silk shirt that was unbuttoned far enough to reveal a patch of dark hair and a gold chain. His dark hair swooped down over the top of a pair of mirrored sunglasses, a faint scent of sweet cologne followed him, and in his hands he carried his shoes as if walking on the beach had been a spur-of-the-moment idea. Amanda figured him to be someone who lived in one of the buildings nearby, or a tourist staying at the Drake.

"Mind if I have a seat?" he asked, not even giving her time to answer.

"It's a free country," she said. "Sit where you want." She liked the way she sounded, so bold and different from the girl she was back home, as if in breathing the air of the city all day, she'd inhaled some of its energy as well.

"You can't leave now," he said, situating himself into the sand, and then resting back on his elbows and stretching his legs straight out in front of him so that his long, white toes pointed up at the sky.

"I can leave if I want," she said. "I've been here all day. I've had plenty of sun." The shadows from the buildings cooled the air and sent a chill down her sunburned arms.

"But this is the best time to be here. The crowds are leaving, and look at the lake. Calm as glass. You should at least stay until the sun goes down. It's *spectacular*." The last word came out sounding almost like a hiss.

"I can't stay. I have to catch a train. Besides, I don't even know you."

He turned, looked up at her, and lifted his sunglasses to reveal a set of dark, deep-set eyes. He told her his name was Evan Tripp and that he was a freelance photographer in the city, a successful one with pictures that appeared in the papers and in catalogs all around the country. He pointed out the light to her and the way it reflected on the lake, which was smooth now with only a few sailboats lingering off in the distance. He spoke calmly, softly, and like nobody she'd ever heard before. Where she lived everyone talked loud and fast and always with that Midwestern twang and Chicago slang. He offered to buy her dinner, but she said she couldn't accept. "I have a train to catch," she said, though deep down she really did want to stay. She couldn't wait to be older when she could make decisions on her own. When she was fifteen she could pierce her ears, when she was sixteen she could date, at seventeen she'd graduate, and at eighteen—wow, eighteen—she'd be her own boss. Her mom was always telling her to slow down and not to rush things, told her if she wasn't careful she'd wish her whole life away. "Be glad you're young," her mom said. "It won't last forever."

Before she ran off, Evan Tripp handed his business card to her and told her

to call. "I have a project coming up you'd be perfect for. Catalog work," he said. "You've got a nice look. You could model, you know."

She grabbed the card, picked up her beach bag, and ran off towards the walkway that runs along the lakefront where the Sunday night crowd of walkers was already taking in the last few hours before the sunset and another work week began.

"It pays well," he called out, and Amanda Morris disappeared into the crowd.

Amanda Morris had always suspected she was pretty. She was a working-class girl born and raised on the South Side of Chicago with a busty, deep-voiced mother and a father who, though lazy, was as handsome as a cowboy and way into his fifties still bragged about winning the occasional barroom brawl. She had bold looks that had more to do with lust than good breeding or the right mix of genes. She dressed the way all girls did that year, with teased-out hair, dark eyeliner, big hoop earrings, and tight black clothes. She had a mane of brown hair that she lightened with lemon juice, a soft fleshy mouth that pouted more than it smiled, and dark accusing eyes. She *was* pretty.

She'd expected his studio to be modern and bright and located in one of the glass-front office buildings downtown. She pictured a flurry of activity surrounding them—assistants, makeup artists, wardrobe consultants all rushing against deadlines—as they worked through the afternoon, but as she sat in the back of the cab on a Saturday morning just two weeks later and stared out at the one-story house on the West Side of Chicago, her better judgment told her it would be best to turn back and go home. Instead, she paid the driver and checked her reflection in his rearview mirror. Why not? Chances like this only come along once in a lifetime. If these pictures turned out, it could be the beginning of something big. Money and looks, she thought, that's what this world is all about, and Amanda Morris felt as if she were about to have it all.

The wooden steps leading up to the front door were brittle, peeling, and ready to crack. Gray paint peeled away from the house in strips and curls revealing a structure made of weathered and dried planks; a screen door dangled from its hinges. Curtains covered the windows from inside; the outside glass was clouded over with a film of dust and grime. Fear tried to take hold of her, but she suppressed it. She lifted a reluctant and childlike hand and knocked lightly, then a little harder. The door swung open, and in a flash there stood Evan Tripp all straight and proud as if he were a present. "Amanda Morris," he said, "star of the future!" She liked the way that sounded—*star of the future*—and laughed.



He bowed deeply and waved her inside where it was as cool and dark as a cellar. The front room was arranged like a studio (he *was* a photographer) with white sheets draped over the sofa and down to the floor. Two lamps stood on either side, and pointing at it all, a camera on a tripod was focused on the furniture. Amanda took a moment to let her eyes adjust to the dark, and when they did she saw that the house was even smaller inside than it looked from the outside. Behind the front room was a tiny kitchenette sparsely furnished with a table and two mismatched chairs. The walls were yellowed and bare; stains of various shapes covered the carpet. Evan Tripp put an arm on her shoulder and gave her an apologetic look. "I'm sorry we had to do it here," he said. "My studio downtown is being remodeled."

"I see." She tried to act as if it didn't matter either way, tried hard not to sound like the young girl that she was.

"The place is a mess, I know. I'm renting." He paused and, with a solemn look on his face, said just one word: "Divorce," as if that explained it all.

"Oh," said Amanda, as if she understood.

"You're not nervous, are you?"

"Should I be?"

He smiled. He was wearing the same clothes he had on the day they met: tan slacks, mint green shirt, and the same sweet cologne. His hand relaxed on her shoulder as if it had been there all her life.

"No second thoughts?"

"None."

"Good."

He asked if she'd brought the things he'd asked her to bring. (On the phone the week before he'd told her to bring something light: "You know, a bathing suit.") He told her she could change in the bathroom and pointed her down towards the end of a small hallway. On her way, she passed two closed doors and one room that contained a few cardboard boxes and a bed covered with a leopard-print spread. The bathroom was tiny and cramped; the air was thick, balmy, and heavy with the lingering of sweet cologne. She closed the door, locked it, put her ear to the door, and heard him walking in the kitchen. It was a relief to take off her shoes, and she rubbed her feet that were red and swollen from the heat. She stepped out of her cutoffs, slipped her shirt over her head, took off her bra and underwear, and stuffed them deep into her bag. She checked the door to make sure it was still locked. She felt him closer to her, as if he could see her, even though she knew she was alone. She stepped into her bathing suit, a thin, faded, purple one-piece that still held the faint smell of



Coppertone and chlorine left over from days she'd spent at the city pool. When she had it on, she was surprised how different it looked. She had never noticed the way it clung to certain places, or how it dipped a little too low in front, rose up a little too high on the hips. It didn't cover so much as it highlighted the places. She put on a little more makeup, teased out and sprayed her hair, darkened her eyes with liner. She was shocked to see the girl looking back in the mirror.

When she walked into the front room any fear she had earlier had melted away. Even the room felt different. It was *her* room; she was in charge. Music from the stereo filled the room with a soft, wordless song. His back was turned, and he didn't hear her enter the room.

"Hey," she said, "what do you think? Is this OK?" She put a hand on one hip and kept the other down at her side. Evan Tripp turned around and said nothing at first.

"What's the matter? Don't I look OK? Don't you like it?"

Then he smiled. "Sweetheart, you've got the goods all right. You're gonna be perfect." He led her to the sofa and told her to sit and relax, then handed her a glass of pink wine. "A little something to loosen you up. Some people get nervous under the lights."

"I'm not some people," she said.

He laughed. "I told you about these pictures, right?"

She nodded. On the phone he'd told her they were for a fitness brochure. Everybody was into fitness, and products were coming out left and right. He needed a girl with the right look, someone young, healthy looking—someone with a firm body.

"You're the one," he said. "I knew you'd be perfect. I've been at this a long time. I can tell right off the bat." He was looking at her so closely now that Amanda felt he could see right through her. His eyes were black as a dog's, with lines at the creases and little pockets that drooped underneath.

"What's the matter? You act like you never seen a girl before," she said, and took a big sip of wine. She'd never had wine before, and it tasted sweet and cold and gave her a little tingle. Evan Tripp went behind his camera and looked through, then stood and looked out at her again.

"Believe me, I've seen plenty." He moved the camera a little higher, and adjusted the lens.

"So, you used to work in California?" she asked.

"Yep."

"Tell me what it's like. I'm thinking of moving there myself someday."

"It's messed up, that's all. Crazy things go on out there."

"Like what?"

"Like things you've never even heard of, that's what."

"You'd be surprised at what I've heard about," she said. Her voice didn't even sound like hers anymore. It was confident and smart. She felt like she knew it all. The wine was almost gone and she asked for some more. He poured her a little, just half a glass, saying he didn't want to have her too drunk. "There's a fine line," he said. "The pictures would show. It shows up in the eyes." She stayed seated on the couch, the sheets cool underneath her legs.

"Tell me what it's really like."

"Expensive and, like I said, crazy."

"That's not what I want to know. What do people look like? What do they wear?"

He adjusted the lights and turned them on, blinding her at first. "People are people," he said. "They're no different wherever you are. They all want the same thing."

She had to squint to see. "What? What do they want?"

He walked over and took the glass from her hand, then leaned in close to her ear. "*Love*," he whispered.

He took the glass from her and placed it on the table in the kitchen. He moved now with an air of authority. Now he was in charge, and Amanda felt she'd asked too many questions or sounded like a stupid, suburban girl. He was probably used to professional models, the kind with agents and appointment books and attitudes ten miles long. She fluffed her hair, straightened her shoulders. He came back and told her it was time to start.

He had her kneel on the floor with her hands on her knees and her back arched like a gymnast. He positioned her this way and that, moved her shoulders a little to the right, then a bit to the left. He told her to look up, then over, and then down. Smile, just a little, then wide and show some teeth. Pout, squint, pucker, sneer. He took three rolls in no time. "You're a natural," he said. "Amanda Morris, you're a *star*."

She knew he was right. Nothing had ever felt so right in her life. She loved it and wasn't feeling the least bit shy. He loaded the fourth roll of film, stepped behind the camera, and paused. Then he stepped out from behind the lens and just looked. He looked up and down like he'd never seen her before.

"What? What's wrong?"

"Nothing's wrong," he said. "I was just thinking."

"Thinking what?"

"Thinking how we might do something different."

“Thinking how we might do something different.”

“Like what?”

Lots of girls do it, he said, even famous ones. Ones you see in movies and on TV. It's a dog-eat-dog world out there and if you're not willing to play the game, there's plenty of girls who are. It's art. There's nothing wrong with it. It's art. It's the way things are. There's the money, too. He could sell these for God-knows-how-much. She was special. Never seen a girl like her before. She had it. He'd give her five hundred dollars extra. Five hundred. There's plenty more after that. This was just the beginning. Sky's the limit with looks like that. There's nothing to be ashamed of. The body's a natural thing, God's creation.

The sheets under her legs were sticky now and warm from the lights and moving around. Evan Tripp looked patient and pleading, sweet, a little tired even. His face looked almost childlike, and she knew in that moment there was nothing he would not do for her. She was in charge; she was *smart*. Powerful. She had it. This was her chance. How many girls had been on the beach that day? Hundreds, at least. And of all of them, he chose her. Only an idiot would give up a chance like this. And if she didn't do it, there were other girls who would. She knew that for sure. He could walk into any mall right then and find at least ten who were willing to do it. No way. This was her chance, chance of a lifetime. Five hundred dollars, and that was just the beginning. Who knew where this would take her? Who knew? She'd read about things like this happening all the time to girls her age. They get discovered in shopping malls or at concerts, and next thing you know they're rich and famous. She'd be swimming in money. She'd move somewhere warm like California or Florida and be suntanned all year long. She'd buy her dad a convertible and her mom a new set of clothes. As she lowered the straps of her bathing suit down over her shoulders she felt her body swell, her head spin, and a feeling came over her so powerful she thought she was going to faint. This is *it*, she thought, and she stepped out of her suit and into the rest of her life.

# Last Chance Tavern

Kinchem Hegedus

- Remote**/ adj. 1. far apart  
2. far from civilization, secluded  
3. not closely related  
4. aloof, not friendly

THERE'S NOT A THIRSTIER PLACE ON EARTH. PORT HEDLAND IS ONE OF THE driest towns on the driest continent on the planet. It's the biggest iron-ore port on the west coast of Australia and sits on a parched desert harbor, jutting out into the Indian Ocean. You have to drive ten hours a day for two days, in any direction, to reach a decent-sized town, three days to reach a city. In between there's nothing but red desert, gray bitumen, and blue skies.

Red powdery dust finds its way into the smallest of spaces, under your nails, in your eyes, your hair, filling every crease in your skin. Your mouth, full of rust. The only people who live here are miners and the aborigines, and the only thing that gets a man through the day is the promise of that first cold ale hitting the back of his throat and cutting its chilling path to his belly.

Grog is god in Port Hedland. Its history is an unending story about drinking. Getting pissed is more than a bit of fun in this place. First it was the



seamen, the whalers and pearl divers who drained their wooden casks of rum. Then came the gold diggers drinking anything they could get their hands on, and now it's the ironworkers and the aborigines.

Grog is the devil, too. *Gurry*, one aboriginal name for alcohol, means poison.

I drive into Port Hedland just as the sun's setting. The first thing I see, from a few miles out, is a row of pyramids. As I get closer I see huge steel towers with bridges and pipes suspended from different levels in crazy patterns that make black silhouettes against the red purples of sunset.

What looks like a sheet of water covers the ground next to the road, like a mirror reflecting purple shadows on the pyramids. Signs lurch out of the twilight—Pilabara Salt Mines, Nelson Point Iron Ore Crushing Works—bold and harsh and jarring, out here, where you feel like you, too, are just another grain of sand. But the eeriness is strangely beautiful, too.

There's a train heading for the road, and I race it to the crossing but don't make it and have to wait. Iron ore trains are anything up to a mile long, an infinite number of cars piled high with red ore, monotonous, clunking beasts that finally slip into the darkness like giant worms burrowing into the earth.

It's Friday.

I'm stuck in Port Hedland, waiting for parts to fix a broken axle. The first time I see the Last Chance Tavern, it's like a mirage sitting there, bare, in the middle of a red-gravel car park the size of a football field. A handful of skinny girls, with long legs and black skin, faded cotton sundresses and bare feet, play with a heavy skipping rope, singing and laughing. Two boys hide around a corner of the building, throwing stones at the girls.

Inside it's cool and dim and full of shadows.

I'm eighteen, taking a break and working my way around the coast before going back to school, doing whatever work I can find. I've worked in pubs, made cappuccinos, served food, picked grapes, and even canned peaches. Bar work is the hardest but usually pays best and is often the most fun, too.

This is your typical "ladies lounge" bar. I've arrived during that quiet lull after lunch is cleaned up, too early to worry about dinner yet. The room is sprawling like the desert outside and feels empty despite a dozen long tables and twice as many small round ones, all surrounded by lime green and orange vinyl-covered chairs. A big, old jukebox with a visible stack of black vinyl records plays Procol Harem's "Whiter Side of Pale," and a couple of pinball machines stand on one corner flashing lonely pink and blue lights at each other.

There's a woman humming behind the bar and polishing glasses. She must

know I'm there, but she doesn't look up. "Hi," I say, louder than I wanted to, and my voice cracks open the room. I cough, pretending to clear my throat. "I'm looking for work." Her eyes look up but still she doesn't lift her head. "You got a name?"

"Mango."

She shakes her head a little and her eyes fall down again. "You'd betta go ask Shorty . . . tell him Sylvia sent ya."

Sylvia looks tired. Everything about her is heavy, slow, and gray, except for eyes that still flash with a feisty glint of youth. Too many years in the Last Chance Tavern have etched deep lines in her face. The lines at the corners of her mouth curve down, pulling into a bitter frown, and it looks like she's wearing the loss of long-forgotten dreams. Sylvia smells like fresh yeast, and her skin is pale and puffy like dough.

"He's in the front bar, through there, luv," she says, and she turns, leans back with her bum resting against the bar, and watches me leave as she lights a Winfield Red cigarette. She blows a line of smoke in the direction I'm supposed to go. I leave her behind its swirl.

An old wooden bar draws a line down the length of the room. I walk along a black rubber mat that runs down the center of a narrow passage behind the bar. A heavy six-and-a-half-foot frame stoops over a mop bucket. He curses as he washes away the sticky black swamp covering the boards. The room smells of sour beer and man sweat.

Shorty doesn't see me or doesn't look up. He mumbles to himself as he slaps the filthy mop across the floor. A hand-rolled cigarette burns in between his thick lips, and he squints as a spiraling seam of smoke stings his eyes.

Gaping doors open into the dusty, red-gravel car park, drawing my eyes outside and up to the brightness of the cobalt sky. There are no cars out there, nothing but red and blue as far as the eye can see.

I can hear the distant peals of little-girl laughter and the constant heavy thud of rope hitting the dust and scraping through the gravel.

Inside the bar, the walls are lined with boards that open up into a cavernous gabled roof. One lone fan spins above, chopping at the dull air. The faint whisper of a breeze brushes the bare skin on my arms. The paint on the wall-boards is faded, cracked and peeling—barely there at all. I can't tell what color they used to be.

Two big chrome beer taps steal my attention. Their proud stature gives them absolute dominion in the shabby room. Their thick shiny handles are

covered in beads of water, and I wrap my fingers around one knowing it will feel as cold as ice. I wipe my chilled fingers across my face and around the back of my neck, but relief from the heat in this town is only ever fleeting.

A loud splash of water makes me look up, and I watch Shorty's looming silhouette against the brightness of the open doors. He swings the bucket over wet stains in the red dust outside. Another splash and Shorty mutters to himself, then bellows, "What d'you want, girlie?"

He comes closer. Shorty's limbs are like telegraph poles.

"I want a job."

"Can y' start tonight? It's payday," he squints into my face. "Sylvia usually works paydays—Sylvia and me," he says. "She could do with a night off."

I hesitate, for barely a second, and Shorty shakes his head, as if expecting me to say no, then turns to walk away.

"Hey, Shorty, what d'ya pay?" I call out.

He looks over his shoulder, then turns back and grins, "Ten bucks 'n hour, but only if y'last at least three," he challenges.

"You're on," I stick out my hand to seal the deal. His woody hand engulfs mine and he shakes it vigorously.

"You can pull a beer, can't ya, girlie?" he asks.

"Sure," I laugh. "I'll see y' later then."

They call the bar "the pit." On Fridays the pit belongs to the aborigines. The men drink at the bar while the women and children camp under the trees outside the 7-Eleven at the caravan park, preferring to drink under the stars. Half of the town's aborigines are homeless, and those who do have a home to go to live in tin shacks in places with names like "Seventeen-Mile Camp." The aborigines have been a part of this land for time eternal—long before the white men who came on their tall ships with billowing sails. The white men who brought civilized ways to kill. The aborigines knew what was going to happen because, in their dreaming, white had always been the color of sorrow and death. They paint white stripes on their faces if someone dies.

The white fellas drink beer or rum or whisky; they drink 'til they fall down, then they go home to their neat houses and flop onto their big beds. In the morning, they drive their shiny cars to well-paid jobs. The black fellas drink cheap port 'til they fall down and sleep where they drop. If they make too much noise or get in the way, they get picked up by the cops and taken to the lock-up 'til they sober up. Then they go back to the low-lying ditches that circle the town. These aborigines are called the "ditchies" or "ditch warriors."



They live, sleep, eat, and die in the ditches.

I walk into the pit, and in less than a second my knees turn to jelly and I fear I'm going to wet my pants. My skirt is sticking to my thighs in the heat. The noise is feverish, the air is choked with smoke, and Sylvia is the only other woman in the bar. For a moment I stand in the doorway and stare at Sylvia. I was wrong about her doughy softness; in here, with all these men, I can see it conceals the iron of her temper. The men treat her with rough affection. "C'mon, Sylvia," a squat black man laughs, waving an empty glass at her, "git over 'ere b'for I come an' git you!" In their eyes she's an honorary bloke, and they know just how much she'll take before she'll turn and walk out, leaving them high and dry.

Shorty sees me and calls out, "Don't look so scared, girlie . . . what's y' name?" He doesn't wait for an answer, as if he's already decided "girlie" would do, 'cause from then on that's who I am. Girlie.

Sylvia looks up, smiles, then leaves.

I fill a glass with ice. The ring of ice on the glass echoes around me, as if the room is empty. I pour rum, like liquid gold, into the glass and watch it run its course through the ice. I close my eyes and swallow, savoring the taste of the chilled sweetness. I open my eyes and lick my lips, feeling the heat fill my belly.

It's just pulling beers, right?

I catch a glimpse of my own reflection in the mirror behind the bar, like a camera flash in the dark of night, my white skirt and T-shirt dazzling in the dark crowd. My olive skin and waist-length blond hair make the white look even whiter.

The pit is a riot of rampant testosterone. The place is packed, with men spilling out into the car park out front. It sounds like every one of them is shouting and already half pissed. It's only six o'clock.

Again the old wooden bar draws a line down the whole length of the room. There's Shorty and me on one side and a hundred thirsty men on the other. Nothing but the bar and a couple of beer taps in between.

All the men on the other side of the bar are black. Black, not dark brown or even charcoal, pure black black. More black men in that one room than I've seen in my entire life. I want to stare; I've never seen faces or skin like theirs, their eyes like deep gashes, even blacker than their skin. Their brows hang down over their eyes, almost touching the balls of flesh that rise up from their cheekbones. They look right through me and make me feel hollow inside.

I want to be invisible but my hazel eyes betray me, screaming out, "Look



at me,” to the men with eyes as black as death. I twist my hair into a knot at the nape of my neck and squint until my eyes are almost closed.

One of the young ones scowls at me. He’s at least six feet tall and looks like a big black bull; he snorts and stomps, his fists on the bar, and yells for me. His fierce white eyes look like horns.

I’m not used to this; usually the men in bars like me and are nice to me in that blokey-flirty kind of way, or they tease me, and I can usually handle them either way, giving it right back to them if they give me a hard time. But not here; now I’m just plain scared to death. I can feel something I don’t recognize here, something so alien that goose bumps crawl in a rush up my arms and legs. I shiver from head to toe. There’s not a soul here charmed by a pretty face—unless, maybe, they just don’t think I’m pretty at all? Shit. I’m suddenly panicked; not having my looks to trade off leaves me with what? My wits . . . but I know nothing about this place. Nothing.

But I can’t let myself get scared, so I just keep on working like a maniac, covered in beer and sweat. Just do the work. It’s forty degrees in the shade outside and about the same in the pit.

I keep my fear at bay, focusing on the beer tap, and everything else becomes a hazy backdrop. The handle on the tap is enormous. It’s shiny chrome and slippery as hell, covered with beads of sweat. I can barely fit my fingers around it, and it’s as cold as ice, its touch the only relief there is from the gagging heat. Every chance I get I wrap my fingers around the tap, then wipe my icy hands on my face and down the back of my steaming neck.

Shorty must’ve seen me shaking, so he makes a bit of an effort and yells at the big black bull with ferocious horny eyes, “Ay, Nunga, this is the new girlie . . . Snow, Ernie, you buggers be fair an’ give ’er a chance.”

I’m washing glasses, then I look up and see this white guy. His straight red hair hangs to his shoulders in dusty locks from under a red bandana. He’s wearing knee-high tanned-leather boots worn soft as skin; his jeans have frayed holes in the knees, and his blue shirt flaps open over a dirty white T-shirt. His face is freckled, dirty, and unshaved, and he’s covered in a shroud of red dust. Part man—part desert. Looks like he’s fresh off the road, probably a biker. He rolls a cigarette with one hand, expertly working long fingers, as he scans the bar, pausing briefly on my fixed gaze. He nods at me, finishes rolling, then bites the end off the rollie and spits it out.

“Oy, Shorty, y’ugly bastard,” Nunga yells gesturing towards me, “how long does a boong have to wait t’get a grog ’round ’ere?” Nunga stands there, hands on his hips and stares at me, skinning me alive with his horny eyes. Surprising

myself more than anyone, I put both hands flat on the bar in front of him, fingers spread wide, "Listen, mate, you want a beer? Why don't y'ask me?" We stand there frozen, eyes locked for an eternity of two or three seconds, and then a moment before I fade into panic, he just says, "Six schooners." He turns back to Ernie and his mates, flicks his head back towards me. "Big mouth for a skinny little cunt," he says. His mates erupt into laughter and backslapping. Ernie turns to Snow, the youngest one in the circle, and belches as he says, "Oy, Snow, you gunna fuckin' shout tonight or what, you fuckin' bludger abo bastard."

Shaky and clammy, my fear swells, seeping through my pores, and the air around me feels heavier and heavier. I take six glasses and line them up next to the tap. I pull the tap down so it locks on and pick up a glass. I become a machine and find a swift easy rhythm until all the glasses are full, with perfect three-quarter-inch white beards. Before Nunga has a chance to have another go at me, I put the beers on the bar, take his money, and move on.

I look over at the white guy standing against the wall. He's obviously been watching me the whole time and is still staring. He smiles and smacks at the pockets in his shirt and jeans, waving his rollie at me, shrugging his shoulders, like he's asking me for a light. I turn away towards three men barking at me.

When I get back to the tap I can still feel him staring, but I don't look at him. In the corner of my eye I see him walking toward me, but I keep my eyes on the tap, feeling my belly twist. I see his big boots and then the frayed gray holes in the knees of his jeans. A delicious smell of salty man sweat reaches the bar before he does. "Hey, babe," he says, in a slow, deep, outback drawl, "Gimme a cuppla shots a' Bundy and a schooner, and . . . y'got a light?" He puts a scrunched-up twenty on the bar. His money's as dirty as he is. I turn and reach for the Bundy and feel his eyes burning into my back and down to my legs. My face flushes hot and red. I try to sneak a peek at him through the mirror behind the bottles, but the sneaky bastard's eyes are there, waiting for me. He winks.

I keep my eyes down when I put the drinks in front of him and snatch the twenty. When I get back with his change, he grabs my wrist. I nearly jump out of my skin and stare at his hands. They're so huge my wrist looks like a matchstick about to be snapped in two. I look up and see his eyes for the first time, blue and clean and glinting like sunshine on water. I just stand there like some dumb schoolgirl, staring into his eyes. "Don't forget the light," he says. So what do I do? I giggle! It just burbles up and out, and then it's out there, this idiotic giggle. I'm so totally disgusted with myself that I just throw him a box of matches and slink away.

A brawl breaks out in the middle of the room, and Shorty roars at them to

take it outside. Then he comes over to me and says, "Oy, girly, y'd better wash up these glasses and get outta here before it gets too out'a control. I'll call Sylvia." I'm thinking this is the best idea I've heard all night, and I'm almost done when the crowd spews back into the bar.

Nunga calls for a beer, but I ignore him and don't look up, hoping that Shorty will go. Then, from somewhere very close, I hear the white guy call out loudly, "Oy, sweetheart . . . another Bundy over here." My reflexes are on red alert, and I'm not expecting to hear his voice so close, so I jump with fright and look up at him, operating on some sort of automatic pilot, and then turn to go to the rum bottle.

Before I know what's going on, big black arms are right there, on my shoulders and under my arms, and next thing I know, I'm in the air and over the other side of the bar. Nunga. I hear glass breaking and the sound of my voice screaming. All I can see is black hair and black skin, and my face is pushed right up into his armpit. I can't breathe; I gasp, and gulp his smell, a smell as unfamiliar as the touch of his velvet, black skin. He pulls my face up to his and pulls me close so I can see the soft pink skin under his clenched teeth. I feel his hot breath basting my skin with his anger.

"You think this bar is going to keep me away?" he roars, fists tight around my arms. "You think that's enough to keep you safe on the other side?"

I close my eyes, wishing the moment away, but he keeps talking; his lips are close to my ear, his whispers angry, urgent, and disgusted.

"Look at me," he shakes me. "Look at me! My money not as good as 'is, ay?"

I open my eyes and look at him, but I don't know what he wants me to say, and I can't speak a word anyway—so I just stare at him. I see hatred in his eyes. Nausea drains the blood from my head, and my body goes weak. His skin ripples wildly and feels like fire. Nunga holds me tucked under his arm like a rag doll. Then I hear Shorty: "You're even dumber than I thought, you fuckin' crazy boong . . . you wanna close me down for good or what? I don't need this shit . . ."

Nunga squeezes me tighter; the room is quiet and still, and I hold my breath and wait. Nunga's big, brown leather work boots are directly under my face. Then, the biker's boots are there, and Ernie's feet, bare black feet in rubber sandals, back away. I twist my face up to see what's going on, and I see this knife, a gleaming six-inch blade the shape of a fisherman's knife, tucked into the biker's belt, under his shirt, hidden from everyone but me. The biker and Nunga stand there, just staring at each other. For a moment no one breathes, and the room is frozen, silent, except for the sound of my panting breath. Nunga shudders,



then—bang! He drops me flat on the floor, in all the beer and butts and shit! There are more shouts, but I hear only roars like distant thunder. I do not move. My cheek is wet with something sticky that smells like sour piss. Three bent cigarette butts lie twisted together an inch from my nose. There is a cold splash, beer on my face, stinging one eye, and a shuffle of legs. I close my eyes. This is not my world. This is not happening to me. Things like this don't happen in my life. I think of Dorothy's ruby red slippers. I think of my sister Ruby. Somewhere far away, she's lazing about with a martini, dragging slowly on a Benson & Hedges cigarette. I see her perfect painted red lips sip on the cool glass, close around the cigarette, then open into a lazy laugh. Nunga laughs. His laugh is weary and sad, like he's too tired to care. I open my eyes as he kicks his big work boot toward me, and I look up and see him look straight into the biker's blue eyes again and say, "This your skinny white cunt? . . . you can 'ave 'er."

Shorty scoops me up in his steely arms and carries me out to the back room, barking at one of his mates, "Get this girlie outta here, before she makes any more trouble!"

A deep rumble of a bike kick-starts, then rolls away. The noise cracks the hushed stillness of the bar, and then it's as if nothing out of the ordinary had happened, as if I'd never even been there, but I can still feel Nunga holding me, still feel his anger and still smell the unknown on his skin.



# My Night of Ecstasy at the Camelot Inn

Brian Costello

April 30, 2002

Mr. Clifford Postelnik  
On-Site Manager  
Camelot Inn Limited, East Colonial Drive  
Orlando, FL 32826

DEAR MR. POSTELNIK,

I don't know if you remember me or not, but seven years ago I worked the Front Desk Night Auditor job of your hotel, every Monday through Friday from 11P.M.-7A.M., until you fired me because I called you a "fat lazy racist South African asshole" in the half-cocked opinion column I wrote for the *Orlando Inciter*, some lefty rag that I *thought* only a dozen or so brain-damaged old hippies bothered to read, but, as it turns out, you and quite a few other former employers discovered my caustic words in between all those ignorant Marxist analyses of current events screaming in bold sixty-four-point headlines.

Well, what can I say? I was just a kid (a kid!), twenty-two years young, and, like you told me, my writing was "disgusting and abhorrent," and it was

amazing how anybody (even those pinkos) "could print such garbage." I know that now and have come to see the error of my ways.

Mr. Postelnik, please consider this letter nothing less than an act of contrition and an act of confession. You see, like millions of selfish asshole Americans, I am a recovering Starbucks addict. You know those terrible people you see in crummy plays and bad TV shows who say, "Don't even talk to me 'til I've had my Starbucks"? I am one of them. A monster. A demon. A monster demon poo-poo ding dong. I have finally come to terms with this illness, and one of the things I must do in order to cure myself is contact the many people I have hurt through my actions, apologize to them, and purge myself of all the secrets I've kept hidden inside me for these many years.

Cliff Postelnik: Please accept my sincerest, humblest apology for calling you names in that paper, and please forgive me for what I am about to confess, because when you terminated my employment at the Camelot Inn, I knew how Al Capone must have felt when he was sent to jail for tax evasion. My snotty ranting was the least of my crimes. You might want to sit down, Mr. Postelnik, because, even though what I am about to relate is nothing more than a fevered temperance tract, and it must surely be crystal clear to you now that my prose craftsmanship has ascended to enchanting heights, miles above the slime of those expletives, this is a real humdinger of a smutty confession, so please, just hear me out until the end, and may your Christian soul be charitable towards me and my wretched addiction.

It should have been a quiet night at the Camelot Inn. It was late August, and all the tourists had deserted Orlando until the holidays. Except for some masturbating encyclopedia salesmen, there was no business; even you were on vacation in Key West, Clifford, surely sitting beachside with your friends, overcooked pink skin in a Speedo, drinking cocktails held close to your exposed, bulbous belly, as your thin lips sneered while speaking in muffled tones about "the way those spics just shrug their shoulders and say, 'Iss no my yob, mang,' anytime you ask them to do something." Oh, but this isn't about your sick thing, it's about my sick thing. Anyhoo . . .

Me and Mark (remember Mark? He was the guy with the beady brown eyes and the shaved head who you fired for showing up to work one night in a catatonic rufie-and-malt-liquor haze, which, I can assure you, was the least of *his* crimes) were sitting behind our computers playing Minesweeper while guzzling minibottle after minibottle of Cutty Sark that we ransacked from the minibars of the vacant rooms. I was just staring through the tiny window to my left at the empty parking lot, waiting for that sun to rise over the Waffle

House on the other side of deserted six-lane East Colonial Drive, when Mark leapt from his stool and yelled: "Check it out! I swept all the mines!"

I checked it out, inspecting the tiny squares on the monitor and seeing the telltale sign of Minesweeper victory—that little yellow face with the "made in the shade" sunglasses.

"Congratulations," I yawned, patting Mark on the back before returning to my seat as he raised his arms in the air and waved them almost as if he just did not care, gyrating his hips in a kind of bump-and-grind hula hoop while singing in his best heavy-metal falsetto: "Uh look ow! I am Sweepuh of the Mines, Dee-troit! The keepuh of your Desssstineeee, Little Yellow-faced Man! Yeahhhhhhhh!"

I downed another minibottle of Cutty Sark, silent on my side of the front desk. Our computers were separated by three rows of hanging room keys long unused. As Mark's victory song went on, I turned back to the Waffle House, suddenly feeling a hankering for a heapin' helpin' of scattered, smothered, and covered hashbrowns, but also feeling like I could just as easily go off and take a nap in one of the vacant rooms, leaving Mark to watch over the dreary old lobby that always stunk like mildew half covered in potpourri air-freshener, until it was time to do the wake-up calls and cart out the stale (but free) continental breakfast. There was nothing else to do, now that Mark had emerged victorious in Minesweeper, nothing else to do but listen to whatever music blaring through the high-tiled lobby ceiling speakers could jar us from our natural inclinations towards sleep: your Captain Beefheart, your Black Randy and the Metrosquad, your MC5, your Iggy and the Stooges, and a whole slew of other great bands that you, Cliff, like most of the Western world, have never heard and never will because your ears are clogged with bool sheet (pardon my language . . . old habits die hard), or maybe amuse ourselves by taking turns at reading the letters from that *Penthouse* magazine we found left in some sad sack's room in whatever accent the letter writer (who always went by the strange moniker "Name Withheld") hailed from, so if the letter was from, say, New England somewhere, one us would read, "Deeah Penthouse Foahrum: I-yuh nevuuh thawt somethin' so wicked cool could appen to uh hahdwoikin plummuh like meyuuh, but when that suroaretee cawled meyuuh an asked meyuuh tuh go theh and laym some pipe, I-yuh got a lot moah that I-yuh bahginned foah," and the other would laugh and laugh partly because it was a little funny, but more out of the exhaustion and boredom and drunkenness and futility of the job.

The Cutty Sark left me woozy and pensive, in marked contrast to Mark,



who looked like he could handle the dead hours with whatever passed for drunken revelry there at the Camelot Inn, so I was about to announce my nap time, but that, that was when it all started, Mr. Postelnik . . . see, you probably thought all our wacky hijinks up to now were the crimes and misdemeanors I was begging forgiveness over, but no, that was just the appetizer to the main course of my moral dissolution.

Of course, Cliff, I'm talking about the arrival of the Kentucky Rave Women (mere girls, really) into our lobby, into our lives. They bounced through the glass door entrance in front of us, a mere dodgeball toss away from the front desk (Yeah, [sigh], we played dodgeball, too, Mr. Postelnik. Sorry.), wearing oversized jeans and baby T-shirts, holding hands and laughing about something, or, just as likely, nothing at all. The girl on the left had short red hair held in place with a white barrette, mouth encircled by a pink lollipop pacifier which she removed with a lip-smacking pucker sound. A huge smile spread across her freckled face as her head swiveled around to take in the nonsweeping nongrandeur of the lobby. Eyeballs and hips swiveling, she was all like, "This is bee-yew-tee-ful," in some Southern accent I didn't recognize and can't quite do justice to (they all kind've sound the same to me, seeing how Central Florida, dialectically speaking, is more Northern than Southern anymore), "Layuts stay here."

The girl on the right had long black hair and a pierced left eyebrow. Her blue T-shirt had an iron-on that read "Disco" in the font you find on Crisco cans, accentuated with two very pleasant lumps (and I think you know what I mean, Clifford). She, too, was transfixed by the dim obsolescence of the Camelot Inn, but she stopped staring long enough to smile at me, all like in that same Southern accent again, "Pardon me, sir, but dew yew have any vay-cansees in this hoe-tayull?"

"Amber!" the red-headed raver yelled. "Look at this fern! It's so amazing!" Amber watched her friend rub her fingers back and forth over the brownish green fern fronds.

I hopped off my stool, suddenly awake and excited. "Plenty of room!" I yelled across to them in my used-car-dealer smile. Mark tiptoed over to me, tapped me on the shoulder, and asked, "Do you think they're on something?" I looked over to them. They were both touching the fern like it was a golden offering from the gods. Sweat poured out of their faces as their teeth kept grinding, and they never stopped moving, squirming like fourth graders.

"Yes, Mark," I replied, "I do." And yes, I know, Mr. Postelnik, I should have at least denied them lodging for the night, and/or perhaps I should have called



the police, but I was young and impulsive in those wayward days, and I found any respite from the boredom to be quite welcome.

"I think you're right, Keith," Mark whispered while watching the ravers twist away from the fern and approach the front desk, eyes still scanning every dumb little detail about the lobby. As they were about five steps away from my end of the front desk, Mark leapt across to his side while drawling (and I do mean drawling), "Come raht this way and Ah'll check you ee-in."

The two attractive women turned away from me and beelined to Mark's changed voice. All of a sudden, Mark sounded like Roscoe P. Coltrane in hot pursuit of the Duke boys. At first, I thought he was cockblocking me with a phony Southern accent, until I remembered that Mark was originally from Kentucky. Their accents were bringing out his.

Now it was my turn to tiptoe over to Mark's side of the front desk as he asked for and received their IDs. Yes, these two apparent drug casualties were indeed citizens of the Bluegrass State. Over Mark's shoulder, I could see that Amber was indeed the name of the black-haired girl with the pierced eyebrow, and Cara was the name of the red-haired girl sucking on the pacifier.

"Yew from Kintuckee, too?" Amber asked.

"Ah gurew up in Lexington," Mark answered, index fingers hunting and pecking the keyboard through the registration process. Cliff, in my mind, I swear to God, I heard a banjo and voices singing, "Heeeeeeeeeeeeeeeee haaaaaaaw! Hee hee haw haw haw haw: *Hee Haw!*" I half-expected Grampa Jones and Minnie Pearl to enter our hotel, wearing oversized *Cat in the Hat* top hats and Adidas jogging suits.

"Whahd yew move heeyour?" Cara asked between sucker sucks. My suburbanity was lost; my jaw went slack.

"Ah don't know," Mark answered, sliding their IDs across the fake Formica counter. "Parents, Ah gayuss. Is double beds ahl raht?"

"That's fahn." Amber smiled.

"So what brings you to our fair city?" I asked, sounding like the accent-less (to my ears) Yankee I would always be, no matter how much time I would serve in the Sunshine State.

"Druhthhghs," Cara laughed.

"Why ay-yuls whood we come tew orLANdo?" Amber added, still smiling.

She had a good point. Yeah, yeah, Mr. Postelnik, I can almost hear you now, "Why, there are plenty of *great* reasons to go to Orlando: sunshine in February, year-round golf, alligator petting zoos." These are all valid reasons for going down to O-town in your book, but I can assure you that, for whatever was

passing for so-called counterculture in 1995, the only reason for visiting Orlando was to saturate one's self with enough drugs to send two billion Chinamen, Chinawomen, and Chinachildren floating far into the Age of Aquarius, and while I was way less enthusiastic about the whole cornucopia of controlled substances than most, I did inhale, pop, dissolve, and swallow (but never, ever, shoot or snort), and sometimes, I did enjoy it . . . it was either that or befriend boring straight-edge vegan kids with lame tastes in music and even lamer jokes about Satan (the only jokes they knew). Just thinking about it makes me want to get some Starbucks, but, no, I shan't. I am in the midst of a confession.

Amber and Cara were on a road trip, going to the big rave at the Central Florida Fairgrounds the next night. "Is that close to here?" Amber asked as I watched Cara blissfully bounce from couch to sofa around the lobby, basking in the comfort of the exposed springs as dust clouds rose and encircled her.

"It's the raht road," Snuffy Smith Mark said, pointing like an overalled gas-station attendant in some filthy backwater hicktown, "but yew need t' go back inta town, and it's west of theyur bout five mi-yulls. You're on East Culoneeyul Duhrive, and you need to be on West Culoneeyul Duhrive."

Cara ran back to the desk, overworked sweat glands draining her entire face, drenching her red hair. When she caught her breath, she was all like, "I love this room! I love this! I love that!" She loved everything. Her red hair was in a constant state of spin, of taking in every little thing and finding it smile-worthy: the silver "ring for service" bell, the red fire extinguisher, the bowl of decorative fake fruit on the front counter.

"Thanks," I said.

"Did yew gurow up in Florihduh?"

"No," I shrugged, feeling ashamed for reasons I couldn't understand.

"Oh . . .," Cara's voice trailed off as she joined the Kentuckyese conversation between Amber and Mark—chit-chat about stuff I knew nothing about, like mint juleps and the Paducah rave scene.

"Well, here's your key," Mark said, reaching across the front desk, gold key swinging from his right hand. "Room Too-seven-TEEN: straight out the back doors, first stairs on your left, halfway down the hall, overlooking the swimming pool."

"Thank yew very much, to both of yew," Amber said, brown eyes still popping open wide, then rolling upwards until only the white was showing. The dimples never left the sides of her mouth when she smiled. "If y'all wanna come up after work, yew know where to find us."

"We're not tired," Cara added, also smiling. Like I was saying, Cliff, they

were always smiling, big feminine smiley smiles, the kind that seldom ever graced the mugs of a couple of overworked and underpaid (some would call it “exploitation,” Clifford) Night Auditors, a couple of Ragged Dicks who always did the best they could under the circumstances.

So they picked up their luggage and turned around to go towards their rooms, and Mark, like, hopped up on the fake marble front desk and spun on his butt to the lobby side. He snatched Amber and Cara’s luggage—an olive drab rucksack and an old beat-up Samsonite—and said, “Let me get y’all’s sacks, ’kay?”

“Are yew the bellboy, tew?” Amber asked.

“I am tonight.” Off they went, leaving me to the Minesweeper, the Cutty Sark, the Stooges, the Waffle House, nothing. Mark looked back and smiled, putting an index finger to the tip of his tongue, a gesture I understood to mean, “I’ll see if they have any drugs for us.” I gave him a thumbs up, hoping he wouldn’t leave me here while doing godknowswhat with the Kentucky ravers, but in hindsight, Mr. Postelnik, I wish he had. Oh, how I wish he had!

The front desk phone rang.

“Keith?”

“Hah Marrrk!” I twanged, exaggerating his exaggerated accent. “How’re yewww? Got any greeeee-yuuuuuhts?”

“What? Um, no, I don’t, but . . . Amber and Cara? They brought all this ecstasy down here with them, and that’s what they’re on right now? And they were wondering if we wanted some?”

I laughed. “Did you take some already?”

“Uh-huh.”

“How many?”

“Two.”

“How much?”

“For us? They’re on sale, \$10 each.” Mark spoke even faster than normal . . . I don’t think anything had kicked in yet so much as he was totally ready to have some kind of fun on the job, any kind of fun on the job. Not that we weren’t grateful for the opportunity you gave us, but you know how it is! Sometimes, it’s good to “cut loose” on the job, you know?

In the background, I heard the jackboot march of bad club music. It was 1:45A.M., I could have either sat around all night bored and lonely, or I could do something potentially interesting. With girls. Nobody had come in off the street to check in during our shift in three weeks, and there were no reservations. If I took some right then, I knew I’d be straight enough in about four



hours to do the wake-up calls, set up the free continental breakfast, and checkout the early risers.

There was fifteen dollars in my wallet, the equivalent of three hours of untaxed work in the Camelot Inn. "Can I buy one and a half?" Cara and Amber yelled, "Oh-kay!" into the receiver. "We'll be right down," Mark added before hanging up.

The X Amber dropped into my hands were these brownish yellow wafers about the size of a quarter. Now, I'm no Irvine Welsh when it comes to the designer drugs, but I did know enough to know that these things were bargain-basement garbage full of heroin, crank, rat poison, and eleven other secret herbs and spices I was better off not knowing, for everyone's sake, Cliff.

Mark was giving the grand tour of our small workspace. "Wow! This is where you work!" Cara exclaimed. "I love these screensavers on your computers!" Our two computers had green screensavers that scrolled across the red-lettered words, "WELCOME TO THE CAMELOT INN: ORLANDO EAST!!!!!!" right to left across the screen every two seconds.

I smiled and nodded, trying to play along, downing my wafers with the last minibottle of Cutty Sark, wondering if I should really be doing this. (*What would Cliff think?*)

Thirty minutes later, we were jumping on the couches, dancing around the lobby to the music of MC5—which, by any standard you care to measure them—is not housey, not ravey, not drumandbassy, clinkety, clackity, bipitybopity, loopiedoopie, or whatever the hell else club kids have called their music in recent epochs, but it didn't matter because we still found the pummeling assembly-line crush of "Kick Out the Jams" danceable enough.

"This is my favorite band!" Mark yelled, leaping up on the brown couch, springs creaking with every footfall, sweat pouring out of his tan face, black tie flapping in the breeze.

"Mine too!" I howled, scissor-kicking my legs on the off-white couch opposite Mark's, like Pete Townshend on, well, on ecstasy. Between us, Cara passed her own critical assessment of the MC5, proclaiming them to be "like, awesome!" She linked arms with Amber as they do-si-do'd around the fake wood coffee table covered in informative brochures about the many Camelot Inn locations throughout America. We spun and kicked and laughed nonstop, the sweat from the humid Central Florida summer shooting out of our pores like water from a high-pressure shower head, sweat coating the Kentucky Rave Girls' skin in a stunningly beautiful film.

Suddenly, the cops kicked down the front doors and arrested us. Just kidding!



Are you starting to see what's happening here, Mr. Postelnik? You paid Mark and me for services rendered . . . while we were rolling around fudged up (See? My language is improving!) on cheap ecstasy. But wait; I'm not finished; it gets better. Speaking of rolling, that's what our eyes were doing around our sockets—spinning around our sockets—spinning right 'round, baby, right 'round like a record, baby. I'd run off to the men's room to get everybody red plastic cups of water every few minutes; I thought it was my sacred duty to make sure these people I loved (loved! Like never before or since!) stayed perfectly hydrated. A few minutes later, I'd forget that I had already gotten everybody water, and would go back again for more, so by the end of the night, the lobby had Dixie cups everywhere—some half sipped, some untouched, some kicked over. Finding them later was like an Easter egg hunt.

Mr. Postelnik, before we go on here, I just want you to know that, despite what I am about to tell you and despite what I have already told you—I was, and still am, a level-headed expatriate Midwesterner—just folks, really—born from proud, hardworking, French Calvinist stock—so quite naturally you can understand my confusion as to how I went from dancing like a sappy idiot, loving everything and everyone, and I do mean everything and everyone there in that lobby/foyer/hotel, to ending up naked in your office, with Cara naked and reclined across your desk, as I, um (how would Anaïs Nin say it?), kissed her in her most secret place. With tongue. On your desk. On your desk calendar.

How did this happen? I know it did, I mean, that much I remember, but getting there . . . there was all that dancing and the sense of time being compressed into one joyous NOW moment, but it's all hazy except for a brief memory of Mark and Amber walking out of the lobby, linking arms—from behind, a black-and-white utilitarian work uniform and a clownish too-tight T-shirt and too-loose jeans floating away as Cara and I hugged . . . and hugged . . . and hugged . . . standing on the coffee table, yakking endless requisite ecstatic affirmations . . . in that now moment, hugging (not kissing) under the old chandelier with three of the five rows of lights burned out and never replaced (Iss not *my* yob, mang), and I do remember Cara's head tilted onto my chest as my right hand patted down her wet red hair, and my left hand gripped into a damp patch of the back of her T-shirt, and, in hindsight, had my thoughts been of a less chemically-induced nature, I would have asked her if she did this simply for fun or was there more going on, or what little everyday kinds of moments made her smile to herself sincerely and made her really glad to be alive, or maybe just what she liked to do with her time when she wasn't doing drugs. But in the eternal now of an ecstasy high, none of that mattered because

everything was just too great to matter.

Oh, God, and there was all that nonstop talking, Cliff, where your mouth doesn't keep pace with your mind and you just chatter away—"Oh, I wish you could see my writing, Cara, because I'm not really just a night auditor in this hotel I mean I am to pay the bills yeah but what I really am is a writer and I'm gonna be great I mean I'm already great but I wish you could see my writing and," "Oh, an Ah wish Ah could see yer writin' tew, Keith, 'cause Ah wunt yew tew cum bayuck to Kintuckee with me ("I do, too! Let's go!") 'cause I know all these poets theyur and I think you'd love theyum ("I totally wanna meet poets!" If that doesn't show you how high I was, Cliffy, nothing will.) and it would be so great if yew would, Keith! Oh, Keith—you're so rad for somebody who works in a hoe-tayull. Ah feel like ther's a speerichual bond between us."

I think this must've been roundabout the time we started kissing, because nobody's ever told me they've felt a spiritual anything for me. A spiritual bond in the Camelot Inn, bossman. Who'da thunk it, and with a Kentucky Raver I had just met?!? I mean, OK, I've bonded with people over games of Yahtzee, ironic takes on Rod Stewart songs, taste in ice cream, but nothing over the spirit.

I guess it just made perfect sense to try and, you know, like, do it on your desk, as opposed to other places. I mean, we couldn't go back to her hotel room because that's where Mark and Amber had gone, and I didn't think the lobby foyer couches would be very wise because what if some trucker tumbled in from the middle of the night in dire need of lodgings? What then? I'm sure you would have done the same thing in my position, Cliff, and I know you're probably a little mad right now over what I did, or nauseous, but if it's any consolation for you, I couldn't, uh, close the deal, if you know what I mean. This is one of those universal moments in everybody's life—the kind Raymond Carver's disciples tell me I should be writing about—the kind you read about in *Reader's Digest* and the *New Yorker*—when you're too fucked up to make sweet love properly, and you're on your boss's desk as Captain Beefheart softly plays in the other room, and while your dingle-dangle is erect and ready for duty, you know there's no way you're gonna ejaculate.

We fell onto your desk and kicked over your outgoing mail bin, your pencil sharpener, your Dan Marino Bobblehead doll, your big blue coffee cup full of pencils, and as Cara laid (lain? Lie? Loo? I never could get those right . . .) on top of your white August 1995 desk calendar, my stiffy was stiffy, but my sack o' nuts was numb, like it was dipped in novocaine, and the two weren't communicating with each other, and while your desk was much larger than it needed to be for any single Live-In Manager, it wasn't big enough to accom-

modate an X'd out bird and bee engaged in the act of love.

This kinda thing happens to everybody at some point in their lives, but I could still pump, so I did, hands gripping both sides of your mahogany desk (Why, Cliff? Why mahogany? Don't you know every character in every story has a mahagony desk? Couldn't you be more original?), and Cara was softly giggling, as well as wearing the now-familiar permasmile, her eyes closed and head turned to the wall, biting her lower lip, rocking the pelvis, rolling the tongue, oh oh ooo ahhh, Isaac Hayes wah-wah porn soundtrack in my head: bare picka picka dare wacka wacka pare-oh pare-oh pare.

I looked to my right and stared at the framed inspirational poster you hung on the wall behind your chair—the black-and-white photo of the long jumper's feet splashing in the exploding sand with the caption below reading:

DEDICATION:

THE TENACITY TO SEE A TASK THROUGH  
FROM BEGINNING TO END.

I was inspired. I knew what I had to do. I pulled out. Cara's eyes immediately shot open as if to say, "What gives, Keith? Why did you remove your penis from my vagina?" but I rolled off the desk and dug my fingers into the almost nonexistent flab of her sweaty pale thighs and then she closed her eyes and smiled real big, almost as if to say, "Oh, I see now, Keith. You're going to use your tongue to stimulate me to an orgasm. I thank you very much; that's very kind."

That's me, Cliff—always thinking of others, a selfless member of my community, and that's why I don't go down on Ayn Rand's followers. Anyhoo, I was doing what people do when they do what they do to their special lady friends when they're down there—I mean, I don't have to draw you a map here, do I—hott throbbin' cunnilinguistics, baby!—oh man, it was fuckin' tits, Cliffy (you know it is, don't feign hoity-toitiness, my friend . . . you were a snob, but it wasn't like you wore a monocle)—hoo hoo—lickety lickety wet carrotty pubes—dude, you should've *seen* it, but no, you really shouldn't have, and like I said, despite this flurry of immoral and imageless excitement—this is an apology and acknowledgment of wrongdoing . . . my intention is not to arouse as I describe my tongue and mouth roll around and around and around over Cara's Little Debbie Easter Basket Cake pink clitoris (pretty hott, huh? Yeah!). Hoo hah! Humina humina! It hurts me to write this, Cliff, much more than it hurts you to read this, because I'm really confessing something, and I'm not what you call a writer of litteratour erahtek, as I'm sure you've noticed. But anyway, I was way into it because, Ayyyyyy! I'm a guy, a guy on ecstasy, and Cara, she, Ayyyyyy!, she was a woman, a woman on ecstasy.



In the background, I heard Black Randy and the Metrosquad sing, “I Tell Lies Every Day,” and that just added to the happiness of the moment, under the fluorescent lights, wanting nothing more than to make Cara come, and as you can probably tell, I’m no Hugh Hefner in my depictions of love (or even Hugh Beaumont, for that matter), but when Cara arched her back and I could hear her gasping, panting, moaning, shrieking, all that stuff women do when I—the great great chronicler of living and loving that I am—in these love scenes, and oh ho man!, I knew something orgasmic that way came, oh man ho ho yeah yeah yeah pa pa pa pa ooo mow mow! The telltale twitches and writhing of her body and plop of the butt on your calendar and the violent final breathing after the climax. Hooooeee! See, I’m not some cloistered ivory-tower writer . . . I get out there, and I do things, and I writes ’em down!

Anyways, yeah, she came, and, it was all in fun, Mr. Postelnik . . . I just want you to know that I beseech you to consider the undeniable fact that I never stole money from the register, and I could have—easily—and I know I played Minesweeper on the computer, and I know I drank those minibottles of Cutty Sark, and I know I played loud rock ’n’ roll over the lobby speakers, and I know I sometimes slept on the job, and I know I challenged Mark to games of dodgeball in the lobby, and I know I took illegal substances on the job, and I know I performed oral sex on your desk—I’m sorry, I’m sorry—I can’t apologize enough for all these things, and I hope to high heaven that you’re still holding this in your stubby nicotine-stained fingers because if I thought for one moment that you had tossed this in the trash while saying, “Aiie, that Keith! What a wastrel!” I would surely drown my sorrows in Starbucks Frappuccinos and Vente Triple Latte Americano Twistareenios—I mean it . . . and not only that, but like I said, I couldn’t even come—this beautiful red-haired naked raver goddess on your desk—it was like my plinkee-plonker and my sack o’ nuts didn’t want to speak to each other, so, so much for the so-called lovedrug, right?

Right. So when it was over, we were like still in your office, not sharing any kind of postcoital cuddlies—Cara writhing all over your calendar, and me spinning around on your chair like a hyperactive kid at McDonald’s after slurping down a Shamrock Shake. Yeah—still happier than sows in poo, if you’re still wondering, and I stopped spinning long enough to bask in how perfectly all of it made sense—numbnut me, naked in your office, exposed buttcheeks bouncing on your cushy leather chair—next to a girl I just met who got me really extremely high and she’s not wearing nothing nohow neither. Why shouldn’t this sort of thing happen? Probably happens all the time.



But I was sitting there staring at the long white vertical blinds covering the window, loving the way they slapped against each other, and I felt a red-headed kiss on my cheek and a redneck girl voice coo softly, “Oh, Keith . . . wowwww . . . that wuz sooo nahce. Ah think Ah’m fallin in luv with yew.”

Your alarm clock—that old circa 1981 numerical alarm clock that you kept on the window’s ledge suddenly ticked the last minute: 5:07A.M. My awareness of time was the beginning of the end of my night of ecstasy at the Camelot Inn . . . through the slapping blinds dark purple light invaded your office and the birds were singing “Morning Has Broken” by Cat Stevens, and in the absence of roosters, I knew I would have to do the wake-up calls in twenty minutes. See, Mr. Postelnik, even then, I was always, always, thinking of my work.

Our clothes left a kind of Hansel-and-Gretel trail leading out of your office, down the hall and towards the lobby. I got up from my chair, and I thought about kissing Cara on the cheek as I walked past, but thought better of it as I imagined my doppelganger walking the two steps away from myself, bending over, and planting one soft kiss, as she closed her eyes and undulated on your desk like somebody who couldn’t quite keep still no matter how badly they actually wanted to.

I picked up my clothes and put them on one article at a time, following the thirty-foot trail of work uniform and rave uniform components—a pair of black slacks here, a pink pacifier there. At the end of the trail was my black tie, wrapped around the dusty beige lampshade. I picked it up and walked into the restroom at the end of the hall.

“What have I done?” I wailed into the bathroom mirror. “Good God! These hands! These hands! What have they done? What have I done?” No, I didn’t really do that, Cliff, I was too tired (and remorseless) to feel remorseful. However, I followed—to the hilt, mind you—the red, white-lettered sign that said, “EMPLOYEES MUST WASH HANDS BEFORE RETURNING TO WORK.” As an added precaution, I washed my face. While my reflection certainly didn’t fit the mold of the professional Night Auditor as specified in the Standards and Practices section of the Camelot Inn Employee Handbook, I didn’t look like I had committed any of the seven deadly sins either. My hair was disheveled, but that was no big news story, even for FOX News, and my pupils were still enormous, and I still had a dopey grin across my face, but I didn’t feel like how I would if I had been tripping on LSD, convinced everyone around me *MUST* know (how could they not know? Look at me, maaaaaaahn! I’m on the microbus headed for the twelfth dimension let’s go!)—no, instead,

I was (dare I say?) giddy with the prospect of doing wake-up calls, setting up the continental breakfast, and checking out lodgers. I was straight enough to do the job, and high enough to enjoy doing the job. That was my brain-damaged logic during those halcyon days, Mr. Postelnik.

My only real worry wasn't an overly ecstatic attitude to the morning's half-asleep guests, my only real worry was Cara. How would I get her out of the office and back to her room? What if she OD'd and had a cardiac arrest on your desk? I mean—I've seen those highly factual Partnership for a Drug-Free America commercials, and this stuff happens all the time.

My fears were unfounded. She was following the trail of clothing. In our doorway, she was pulling on her big jeans then pulling down her baby T. "Keith, where's the warshroom?" I pointed down the hall. She yawned long and loud as she walked past me.

I walked back to the front desk, and it looked like it would have looked had I just worked all night, except for all those red plastic cups of water I gave everybody during our dancing. I did the 5:30 wake-up calls, a little perkier than usual. "Gooooood morning, sir: this is your wake-up call!" They always said, "Thank you," and I've never understood why people thanked me for waking them up from their dreams. It was like thanking me for cutting them off in traffic or something. The morning was so fuc—err, I mean—incredibly beautiful, Cluffy. The cyan sky brought out line and detail to the sandpines and palm trees poking out across the horizon past East Colonial Drive. The parking-lot lights popped off one at a time as the thick dew blanketed the eight or nine cars waiting patiently to leave this lonely place. I hate to admit it, but since this is a confession, I miss those Orlando early mornings, before the humidity and those Floridians wake up and ruin it.

As I made the last of the calls, Cara took a seat in Mark's usual chair. "Doyew mind if Ah stay here until they get bay-uck?" I said, "No. That's fine," and smiled, feeling the effects of the drug start to wear off, feeling the unconscious effort now to keep myself, happy instead of just being happy.

"And could you turn down the music, tew?" she said, stroking her forehead as if she had a headache.

When she made that request, I knew Cara would never be my spiritual soul mate; Pavement sang, "I was dressed for success, but success it never comes" right before I pushed the off button of the stereo. The next wake-up calls weren't until six, which gave me just enough time to grab the necessary ingredients for the ol' (as in: very ol' and expired) continental breakfast out of the walk-in cooler in the unused kitchen on the opposite end of the foyer. Part of

me wanted to be left alone, the way all men—pigs that we are, oink oink—just want to be left alone after one-night stands, but another part of me wanted to know what Cara's deal was. I watched her stare out at the fading darkness of the lobby as her hands held up her chin. Was this all escapism or was it just simple hedonistic getting your proverbial ya-ya's out? She looked tired—the morning light reflected her baggy pale eyelids, white barrette hung off the side of her head, red hair dangling in front of her eyes. The look of glazed bliss never left her face, and I don't think it was from me or from anything. What do Kentucky ravers think about after a night of oral sex and designer drugs? Beats me.

I asked her to help me get the breakfast food since Mark was nowhere to be found. She nodded and followed me, and we set up the donuts, coffee, juice, and cereal across the circular foyer banquet table. I really tried bringing the conversation down to an earthly plane, but there wasn't much I could get out of her except the postmortem of the night before, talk along the lines of, "Boy, I sure was high!" "Me too!"

There was nothing else to say, and Cara was nice enough to get the coffee started as I poured the Rice Krispies and Froot Loops into their respective dispensers, but I never felt lonelier, lonely for me, lonely for Cara, because we had nothing in common. I felt cheated that something had made me feel something for somebody that was nonexistent, and our silence said one hundred times more than our yakking from the previous four hours.

As the sun turned mean, peeking out over the golden brown Waffle House roof, Mark and Amber came into the lobby holding hands. They were still smiling, but had the same tired and rumpled looks we had, and their addition to the scene hardly peppered the conversation with anything: "Hey." "Sup?" "Nuthin'." "Ha ha." "Yeah." Cliff—this is what I'm talking about—when you feel lonelier and more isolated around people than in the darkest kind of solitary confinement. After giving away so much the night before, we were a roomful of strangers. Right then, more than ever, I wanted a girlfriend, a girlfriend who didn't need to be loaded all the time to like me, to even talk to me. I guess that's kinda corny, but that's how I felt.

"Are yew ready to get some sleep?" Amber asked Cara.

"Yeah," she yawned. "Let's let these boys get back to work."

We hugged our good-byes, bent at the waist, leaned in, and I felt weird about saying, "Nice meeting you," to Cara, as if she was just some random friend of a friend I ran into at the mall. After all, well. You know.

"Now y'all are comin' with us to the fayurgrounds for the rayve tonight, raht?" Amber asked. Mark said, "Definitely!" and I nodded, already knowing I



had no intention of going.

Cara and Amber disappeared, replaced by the usual zombie faces lining up to check out of the hotel for that last hour of our shift, that great army of American Insurance Seminarians. My skin looked gray as I punched the computer through all the checkouts. I asked Mark how it went. He half-smiled and shrugged.

In the breaks between the waves of checkouts, I threw out the many plastic red cups of water I poured for everyone and removed all traces of Cutty Sark before Gary, the 7A.M.-3P.M. front desk clerk, a pudgy man who was pretty cool despite his love of Jimmy Buffet's music, took one look at us and said, "What are you two so happy about?" I didn't know what to say, so I said nothing, and neither did Mark.

Finally, it was 7A.M. We clocked out. I said good night to Mark like it had just been any other ordinary shift with minibottles and Minesweeper. He waved good-bye and walked up to Cara and Amber's room to sleep. He ended up going to the rave after all, and he later told me he had a miserable time walking around the fairgrounds, surrounded by dumbass Floridian drug casualties: some lovey dovey from X, others surly from rufies, others autistic from acid, some a combination of the three. At some point, he lost Cara and Amber to the throng, and he ended up just sitting on a quiet bench outside the fairgrounds on West Colonial Drive, waiting for the morning buses to take him home.

Me, I just got in my car and drove away, windows down, racing home past pastel green-and-purple strip malls while the radio played, "Lonely Planet Boy" by the New York Dolls, with a manly ego like Norman Mailer's and a sad soul like (don't laugh, really) F. Scott Fitzgerald's.

There. Now I feel a whole lot better. Mr. Postelnik, if you actually read through this whole confession, you're a better man than I give you credit for, and if you forgive me, well, you're a saint. Thank you for your kind indulgence, and should there be any Night Auditor positions opening up in your hotel, please don't hesitate to rehire me. My life as an aspiring writer in the big city has been an abysmal failure, and my professors have torn me away from my working-class roots. I need to work, and I've learned my lesson.

Thank you in advance and sorry so sloppy,

Keith LeBlanc

Chicago, IL

*(For Irvine Welsh, his unsubtle female fans, and the great people of Kentucky.)*

# Drowning

Stephanie Kuehnert

ZOË SLID CHASE INTO THE COLD, SHALLOW WATER WITH ONE HAND BURIED IN his sweaty, black hair to support his head and the other firmly wrapped around his side. She looked as if she was bathing a baby, gently and affectionately. The midnight-colored hair framing her milky face and the simple gossamer slip dress she was wearing made her look like a virginal ghost that had stepped out from a holy painting to effortlessly rescue a lost soul from himself. Her muscles tensed and burned as she wrestled Chase's deadweight into the tub, but for a moment the struggle almost felt romantic, like she was giving her boyfriend of nearly two years—the one she had traveled across the country from Chicago to Seattle with—a bath.

Just one month ago, the day before they had left Chicago, they had splashed in the shallows of Lake Michigan celebrating Zoë's seventeenth birthday. Chase had looked like he was getting healthy. He had gained back some weight, making his face look fuller. His skin had lost that pale, sickly hue and was almost tan. She could see him, bright, chocolate eyes dancing, licorice-colored curls bouncing on the nape of his neck like little springs as he ran after her, trying to dunk her in the water, pretending that she had drowned him. She could even hear their laughter.

Zoë's eyes opened like the snap of a shade. If she could, she would live in memories like that forever, but the stark reality couldn't be ignored. It was almost August. They were in Seattle. Chase wasn't drowning, he was overdosing. Chase was fully clothed: T-shirt, jeans, socks, and all were dipped with him into the tub. His pale arms hung out of the black sleeves of his T-shirt like naked branches of a birch waiting for winter. His left arm looked like a dartboard, red and purple holes spreading from the crook in a gory explosion, evidence of the battle with addiction that he had been fighting before he even met Zoë. It was a battle he had been winning the last few weeks that they were in Chicago, but it was never his victories that he hid from Zoë. It was when the losing streak began that Chase betrayed her like this. Giving in. Tying off. Shooting up. Drifting away. All behind closed doors. Like the bathroom door he had disappeared behind that afternoon. Only this time she had been smart enough to follow.

Chase's lips were turning a silverish blue; all the heat in his body drained through them, his soft skin turning clammy and cold. His eyelids fell over his dark eyes like thin summer sheets. Before she dunked Chase into the bathtub, Zoë had tried to force his eyes open, but it didn't wake him. His eyeballs rolled backwards, leaving them colorless except for the pink veins. It was like he was dead. *Was* he dead? The only boy she had ever loved could not just die.

Zoë grabbed his shoulders, shifting her hands so quickly that she was able to let go of him with both hands and catch him in the split second before his body hit the white porcelain. His head lolled back uselessly, and Zoë plunged it under the water twice. Her movements were panicked, but she managed not to get water in his nose or throat, careful so he would not, in addition to what was happening to the rest of his body, choke. She didn't even know if he could choke. Can you choke when you are unconscious? Can you choke when you are already losing breath?

Zoë wondered how long Chase and his best friend Nigel thought they could keep secret their slip back into addiction. When Chase had proposed moving to Seattle, he told Zoë, "If that mountain air and all that rain doesn't keep me clean, nothing will." He tried to smile, but his face still looked gray and hollow from a week of withdrawal.

"Don't you want to go someplace sunny? Get tan and go to the beach every day?" Zoë asked, her face hopeful.

"We can still go to the ocean in Seattle, and it won't be as hot. We can take trips up into the mountains, down to Mount Saint Helens. You'll love Seattle as much as I do, Zoë." The sincerity in Chase's eyes had been enough to con-



vince her. But later, when Chase mentioned Nigel, the other reason for his decision, Zoë stormed with doubt.

“Why do you want to live with *him*?” Zoë demanded, her hazel eyes blazing. At first, Zoë had hoped she and Nigel could be friends. He had always been generous, paying for everything when she and Chase went out with him, and Zoë thought his quiet, reserved air made him mysterious. But as the months passed, Nigel had only gotten colder towards her.

“He’s my best friend, Zoë. I never wanted you two to hate each other,” Chase pleaded, looking like a little boy caught in a battle between his parents.

“I hate him because he’s a junkie. He’s set on you remaining a junkie so that he has a partner in crime!” The bitter words contorted Zoë’s mouth. Her anger sketched lines into her forehead.

“Not anymore. He wants to get clean, too, Zoë. And you know he has money, that huge trust fund. We’ll be able to have a beautiful apartment, to have everything we want for a new start . . .”

“*You’ll* be able to!” Zoë retorted furiously, thinking of all the times Nigel had glared at her with his sharp, coal-colored eyes, and spat the word “Child!” at her through cold, thin lips.

But Chase had soothed her. He wrapped his long arms around her and wove his fingers through her hair. He put his cheek against hers, his raven waves brushing across her nose. The scent of him—that clean but dusty smell of smoking cigarettes in the rain—surrounded Zoë. She wavered, letting her heart, once more, defeat her head. She tried again to be warm to Nigel, forge a friendship with him for Chase’s sake, but it seemed to have failed the moment they got to Seattle.

Nigel had given her a sickly sweet smile when she first entered the apartment the three of them were to share. If Chase didn’t stay clean, she would leave. Zoë held her head high to let them both know she meant it. How long did they think she would deny the clues? The hushed conversations that stopped when she entered the room. The vague phone calls where they said a series of OKs and hung up, claiming it was yet another wrong number. The “job” they shared working a night shift at a gas station that kept them out until dawn, but never brought them home at a regular hour in the morning. How long did they think it would take her to storm in, ripping down the gauzy veil they kept around these secrets, these lies?

One month. They had been in Seattle for exactly one month. Some anniversary celebration, Zoë had thought when she walked in on Chase that afternoon. Zoë and Chase had been sprawled out on their bed reading before

Chase had padded down the long, wood-floored hall to the bathroom. The moment Zoë realized Chase had been gone for ten minutes, she went after him, feeling in her gut that he had been gone for far too long. She swung quickly out of her bedroom, to the right, down the narrow hallway, which looked longer than usual. On cue, Nigel sprung out of his bedroom on the left as Zoë passed it. She caught sight of him lunging toward her out of the corner of her eye. He was a blur of black hair and pale skin, like a wraith. Zoë's stomach dropped when she saw him, knowing that if he was trying to stop her from reaching Chase, something was definitely wrong. She veered to the right, dodging him and slamming her shoulder into the hard, white wall. She started to run, her bare feet making a sickening slapping noise against the dark wooden floor. Nigel chased her, grabbing at her wrist. When his fingers touched her skin, they felt clammy, like a goblin's. Zoë realized that this had been Nigel's plan all along. Nigel was not willing to share Chase with Zoë. He wanted to make Zoë so angry with Chase that she would leave and never come back.

Zoë had broken free of Nigel's grip, slammed the heavy oak door, locked it, and whirled around to find Chase slumped next to the toilet. He was on his back, torso twisted to the left so that his long, spidery legs bent outward, feet directly in front of the sink, which he must have been leaning on while he shot up. His contorted position could have created the classic chalk outline except that his arms weren't flung out in a plea for mercy, they were wrapped inward as if he were cradling the rush he had injected into himself. Zoë had paused only to absorb the look on Chase's face. His paling lips were frozen in that tiny smile he had given her when they splashed in Lake Michigan, when he spoke of his mother's garden, when they kissed, when they sat outside in the summer rain, when she woke up at night to find him just looking at her. The tiny smile that had made her chest whirl since she first saw him, standing in the alley behind a smoky, all-ages rock club, when she was fifteen.

"You dropped this," were the first words he said to her, picking up the ring that she had nervously pulled off her finger and sent spinning down the alley when she noticed him. She had been watching him approach, thinking that he was the most beautiful boy she had ever seen, tall and thin, dressed in faded black corduroys and a black sweater, the tattered sleeves of it so long they reached the base of his fingers. When he looked down to place the ring in the palm of her hand, his jet black curls tickled the bottom of his chin and fell into his dark brown eyes, little strands tangling in the fringe of his eyelashes, which were as long as a girl's. She studied him from his sculpted pale face to his untied black boots as his fingers met hers.

“Chase,” he had said after slowly pulling his hand away.

“What?” Zoë wasn’t sure what he was implying.

He laughed, a deep rumble like a summer storm. “That’s my name.”

Zoë had gone out with him and his friend Justin that night, to a diner a few blocks away. Before they dropped her off at home, she and Chase exchanged numbers, but he never called. Right when she had given up on him, decided he must have been a dream, he showed up at her school during lunch.

Zoë always spent her lunch period outside on the tiny part of her vast high school campus called “Smoker’s Corner.” It was really more of a strip of land than a corner. It was located in the farthest part of the parking lot, all the way back where the asphalt crumbled to glittering gravel, where no one wanted to park for fear of jeopardizing their tires. And Zoë sat at the most distant tip of that strip of land, not there to smoke but to watch. To her all the other students were actors. They wore lavish costumes that placed them perfectly in their social roles. The cheerleaders in their uniforms, the punks in their leather jackets and torn jeans. All of them so dramatic about everything from test scores to imperfect boyfriends to favorite tapes eaten by car stereos. She had started to watch them to figure out where she could fit, but the more she watched them, the more distant she felt herself become from them.

The first drops of rain were falling as Chase suddenly appeared like smoke, dressed entirely in black and gray, and sat down beside her. No one else had noticed him, which made Zoë think that he was invisible just like her. She wondered how someone so beautiful could possibly be invisible and decided that he must belong to another world. She knew then that she wanted to be a part of that world, as she obviously didn’t fit in her own.

So when the bell rang, Zoë had said, “Let’s go,” not wanting to lose a moment with him.

“Where? To your class?”

“No, to my house,” she laughed and took off running. He followed her, and they became inseparable from that moment.

Zoë had been dating Chase for four months when she found out he was an addict. She had had her suspicions. He and Nigel always snuck off to the bathroom at parties, but Zoë figured it was to smoke pot or, at worst, take ecstasy or some other little pill. Zoë was too tangled up in experiencing first love to think about it. All she thought about were Chase’s little butterfly kisses, the way her heart flip-flopped when he put his arms around her, and how her hand seemed to fit into his like a key in a lock.

Then, on his eighteenth birthday, she went to surprise him with a cake.



Zoë entered Chase's room to find him sitting on his bed, preparing to inject something into a swollen vein in his left arm. She had been in his room so many times that she naturally just tapped quickly on the door with her knuckles and then pushed it open with one hand while balancing the cake on her other arm. She expected to see the pale blue gray of his walls glittering silvery in the sunlight that poured in from the window across the room, but she found the room quite dark. Just a few slivers of bright sunlight had broken through the heavy black curtains, burning paths across the clothes and papers strewn across the floor. Zoë started to feel the weight of the cake on her right arm, but she couldn't bring herself to pull her left hand off the door; something felt so wrong. She let her eyes drift slowly to the far left corner of the room toward Chase's bed, hoping to see that he had been reading as usual and had fallen asleep. The comforter had been pushed off the bed, and the black sheets were twisted like Chase had had a fitful sleep. He was wide awake, however, perched at the very top corner of the bed. He had turned toward the wall when she opened the door, but she saw the needle right before he injected it into his arm, tip glinting in a stray sunbeam. Her entire body went numb; she didn't even feel the cake fall.

Zoë shuddered with sobs as Chase tried to explain it to her. He pulled her into his arms, her body sticky with blue icing. "Heroin is my demon," Chase told her as she stared at the syringe that he had flung into the gooey remains of her surprise. "It's a battle I don't want to draw you into. I will kick it to be with you," he promised. She heard his words from far away, unsure he was even speaking them because he sounded so poetic, so lucid. But somehow, no matter how high, he always managed to sound lucid.

Each time Chase slipped away from her, back to it, Zoë knew it was a promise he was less likely to be able to keep. But every time as he flushed his drugs, destroyed his works, and prepared for withdrawal, he told her, "You're my angel. You're my only reason to try," and she felt she couldn't deny him that chance.

Zoë was shocked out of reverie by the tingling in her hands. The water was so cold that she felt frostbitten. Why wasn't Chase waking up? Certainly the shock of your head being dipped into water that frigid would make you feel something. The bathtub was filling. Zoë didn't know if she had remembered to plug the drain or if it was clogged. She wasn't even sure how she had managed to drag a body that weighed sixty pounds more than her own into the bathtub. Her arms started to throb. The adrenaline rush had made her immune to his weight at the time. She had heaved him over the side, his body pulling the shower curtain down with it. The shower curtain was the one object in her

way, but the mass of Chase's body had ripped the rubbery plastic from the metal rings that held it like tearing paper from a spiral notebook. It lay like a limp leaf in the water beneath him, taunting Zoë only with the thought of the way Chase would look wrapped in plastic or a body bag.

The numbing of Zoë's hands seemed to freeze her entire soul for a second. She momentarily stopped panicking about how to revive Chase and assessed the situation. Zoë had only managed to get Chase halfway into the tub, so his chest and hips were submerged in the rising water, but his legs stuck awkwardly out, sprawled over the side. He looked enormous in the tiny bathroom.

With the next breath Zoë took, she felt hysteria spreading from her lungs into every limb. Her face, which had been frozen in grim concentration, contorted in fear. Her eyes burned with tears, and her mouth fell open in a silent scream. She pushed Chase's head into the water again as she looked wildly around for some other instrument she could use to revive him. Nigel kept the bathroom so sterile, it was like a hospital. If Zoë bought brightly colored, scented soap, Nigel put it away in a cabinet. If she accidentally left the toothpaste out, it was immediately shoved back in the medicine chest. If she put a basket of potpourri on the windowsill above the toilet, he threw it away. It was like he thought that if he removed the colorful touches Zoë brought, he could remove her warm presence and replace it with his wintry one. The toilet was white, the shower curtain was white, the cabinet below the sink was white, the sink and the mirror above it were silver. The only thing that deviated from this colorless metallic pattern was the black-and-white tiled floor. The large, checker-patterned, black-and-white squares made Zoë's head spin every time she walked in, and in her frenzied state, they made the room stretch and shrink as she breathed. The only thing that Zoë saw in the entire bathroom was the syringe that had been in Chase's hand when she walked in on him. Looking at it made Zoë's stomach feel acidic, and she could feel bile burning in her throat.

The pounding on the door was so abrupt that Zoë almost dropped Chase into the water. "Zoë!" Nigel roared, but the thick wooden door muffled his voice. Zoë ignored him, concentrating on Chase's increasingly blue skin. When Chase woke up, she would tell him that she wasn't going to live with Nigel anymore, that she knew Nigel's tolerating her was an act.

"LET ME IN THERE!"

Zoë could hear Nigel kicking the door, but she knew it was too thick to break down—one of the first things she had thought of when they had moved in. Too thick to break down when Chase did something like this. She had broken down the door at his father's house. It was flimsy in the way everything

in brand new houses was, but this apartment was sturdy, hollowed out of a mansion that was over a hundred years old. Suddenly, Zoë was homesick. She wanted to be back in Chicago. Back at her parents' house. In her own bathroom with pale blue walls and pictures of babies dressed up as sea creatures. Right now, she could be putting on glitter eye makeup, tapping her foot to the radio, and preparing to go to a concert, a movie, any place where she could be enjoying the summer between the end of high school and the beginning of college. She couldn't believe she had left home and thrown herself into responsibility for this. For Chase. For fucking Chase who was probably dead, she realized suddenly.

Chase's body was getting clammy. The realization that he had broken another promise was seeping in like hot water boiling through a tea bag. But as angry as Zoë was becoming, she didn't want Chase to end up cold, forgotten, and long dead to the world. She just wanted him to open his eyes again. "Wake up," she started to mutter. "Wake up," like a mantra. "Wake up," like a prayer. "WAKE UP!" like she was possessed.

"ZOË!" Nigel screamed. "ZOË! LET ME FUCKING IN! YOU DON'T KNOW WHAT YOU ARE DOING! LET ME HELP HIM!"

His voice jarred Zoë out of her somber state. It faded like Chase's tiny smile, both of their expressions turning blank and purple. A wave of anger slapped Zoë. Like hell she didn't know what she was doing. She had done this three, maybe five times. She lost track after the first time, as soon as she realized this wasn't the kind of thing people ought to keep track of. Most people's boyfriends didn't nearly die once a month. Besides, she knew what Nigel did to revive Chase. She had seen him the first time. He just injected Chase with more drugs. In Nigel's world, everything was solvable with a drug. Weddings, funerals, christenings, there was a drug for every occasion, even if the occasion was a drug overdose. Nigel's solution for drug addiction was simply to take a different drug, advice that Chase kept taking. And no matter what they switched to—cocaine, alcohol, Valium—both Chase and Nigel always ended up back on the same drug. Fucking heroin.

Fucking heroin, Zoë thought. Then, for the first time since she had witnessed the use of heroin, she considered how nice it must be. Chase had always told her to stay away from it. He likened it to a noose, to possession, to a blizzard. Zoë, herself, had always thought of it as a thief, an adulteress stealing everything she loved. But suddenly she realized how nice it would be if she were the one that was unconscious and unable to feel the cold water on her face, hear the pounding on the door, or feel the metallic, checkered bathroom



creeping up around her. How nice.

“ZOË! You don’t know what you are doing! I know what I am fucking doing!” the vile voice reverberated with the pounding.

“SHUT UP!” Zoë finally screeched. “SHUT THE FUCK UP!” She knew what to do. She knew exactly what to do.

She heaved Chase’s body up against the tiled wall on the right side of the shower, wedging him between the water spigot and the corner of the wall. She shoved his legs over the side of the tub, and his stockinged feet hit the porcelain with a wet thud. Zoë stood up and pulled on the knob that controlled the water. Water shot out of the showerhead, which Zoë aimed directly on Chase’s face. Cold daggers of water stung him so hard that pink blotches started to appear on his blue-tinted skin. “Wake up. Wake up. Wake up,” Zoë urged.

A minute passed and still Chase didn’t stir. Zoë was too panicked to tell if he was breathing. “YOU DON’T KNOW WHAT TO FUCKING DO!” Nigel’s voice pounded in her ears.

Shutupshutupshutup, Zoë thought, bending down. She kneeled next to the bathtub. Black-and-white tiles dug in through her soaked slip. Chase’s face was peaceful. This didn’t affect him. He would wake up refreshed, and she would feel like she had aged another ten years. Zoë was too drained to be resentful of that. She noticed how Chase’s wet hair curled into little, frizzy ringlets around his face. He looked like a sleeping child. She couldn’t believe she was about to do what she was going to do. But she had to do it. She was desperate. Everything else had failed. This was the only thing left that she knew how to do.

Zoë pulled her arm back and let it fly. She hadn’t slapped anyone since she was a child wrestling with her cousins. She hit Chase so hard that her hand burned. So hard that his head moved like it was connected with her hand, turning to the side and colliding with the wall that had been supporting it. Zoë watched a drop of blood spray out of Chase’s nose and mix with the water that was raining down all around the bathtub, turning pale pink as it dripped down the perfectly white tile.

Zoë closed her eyes at the moment Chase’s dipped open. She blinked and saw that he was awake. He was completely glassy-eyed and numb, like the only thing that felt familiar to him was the slightly metallic taste in his mouth and the silhouette of the girl in front of him. If Chase’s mind connected the two in any way, he couldn’t bring himself to care enough to acknowledge it. Zoë didn’t have the strength left to feel any reaction to him. It didn’t really matter anymore whether he lived or died. She crawled into the bathtub, the cold shower water immediately drenching her so that her thin clothing became a

second skin. She rested her head on Chase's shoulder. He was still slumped in the corner of the tub, but he wrapped the dartboard arm loosely around her. The blood from his nose stained her dress a sickly maroon color. Zoë closed her eyes and let the pounding of the water ease her into the gray area of consciousness that foreshadowed sleep, the numb place that she knew was the only place she would ever be able to connect with Chase again.

She wanted to beg him for heroin. She knew there was more somewhere. Maybe it was hidden amongst his shaving supplies beneath the sink or buried in a drawer somewhere in the room they shared. If she had the energy that had surged in her while she was trying to revive him, she would look for it. But she was tired. Her arms ached from pushing and pulling his deadweight. Her hand throbbed from the slap. Her fingers and toes were numb from the torrents of cold water that seemed to have flooded the entire bathroom. She couldn't even open her mouth to ask for it, all she could do was peel up the shower curtain that stuck like flypaper to the bottom of the tub and smooth it across their laps like a wet, plastic blanket.

Chase's right hand slowly stumbled up toward the faucet. With great effort, he twisted the water off. It seemed like he still couldn't bring himself fully back into awareness, but like he knew that he had fucked up. The bathroom was so silent, Zoë felt as if she could hear Chase's thoughts. She knew that there was a great white space in his mind between the moment he found a vein in his scabby arm and the moment he noticed he was cold and wet. He would have known that somewhere in that stretch of time, there had been a mistake. He probably didn't know which was worse, that he had miscalculated the purity of the drug or that she had discovered him.

"I'm sorry," he finally managed, his lips tingling like he had awakened them from a long sleep.

Zoë turned her head slowly. Her pale pink lips opened to reply, but her jaw hung loosely, as though it had a broken hinge. Her eyelids fluttered to avoid his bloodshot eyes. She knew there was more to do. She knew she had to make him stand up and walk around so that his blood would circulate again. So his skin would regain its proper color. So he wouldn't slip back into the place she had just brought him out of.

The side of the tub felt like bone. Zoë wrapped her fingers around it anyway and pulled herself up, never taking her eyes off the blank, white wall. She put her toes down first, using them to grip the slick, checkered tiles, so as not to slip. The door had stopped banging and rattling. She knew that Nigel had retreated to observe the aftermath from afar. He was always a skinny

shadow in the dark corner. Zoë turned the tiny, gold knob to unlock the door, feeling the thick bolt shudder back. “Get up,” Zoë instructed Chase without looking at him. The first words out of her mouth were more toneless than anything she had ever said to him.

Behind her, Chase uncurled his limbs from the position Zoë had jammed them into to fit him in the bathtub. He stretched to his full height, towering almost a foot over Zoë’s head. With his wet clothes clinging to his naturally thin frame, he looked skeletal. His hipbones, cheekbones, and ribs were jabbing through his ghoulish skin. That was why she couldn’t look at him and turned away. She couldn’t face another sign that she had ignored. If heroin hadn’t swallowed the healthy ten pounds he had gained back before they left Chicago, she wouldn’t have been able to lift him. But most of all, Zoë didn’t want to see his face. The cavernous eyes. The bloodless lips. The drooping black curls pasted to his colorless cheeks.

Zoë felt his hand rest softly on her shoulder. Now he was heavy. Now his weight could push her down to the floor where she would eagerly be swallowed by the black-and-white tiles. But it wasn’t over yet. Zoë couldn’t rest. She knew that Chase couldn’t walk to the bedroom on his own. She draped his bruised arm around her neck and started slowly down the hall like an antique engine struggling to pull an oversized load. Chase’s wet socks thudded against the floor with every step he took. This is the last time, she told herself. If she did this again, she would collapse in a heap of dusty, battered parts.

As Chase changed out of his soaked clothes, Zoë stared out their bedroom window. There was no use in trying to talk to him yet. He was still high. Or low. She didn’t know if, in his head, he was buzzing in some bright field or wallowing in a private, dark room. He had mustered that two-word apology, but it would be hours before he could speak in sentences, present her with excuses or denials. Depending on how strong the stuff was, he might not be ready to talk until morning. And then, it would depend on what phase of the addiction he was in, whether he would dismiss the incident as just a mistake or sincerely beg for her forgiveness, telling her, “I promise I will kick it to be with you.”

It’s over, Zoë thought, as she watched the rain drizzle down, but who will end it first, Chase, you or me? Through the coming darkness of night, Zoë could see the water eroding the lawn. It had rained for days. Beyond the muddy yards of the houses around them, Zoë knew there were mountains covered with fresh leaves and bright flowers. To the south, there was a volcano throbbing red and waiting to bubble over. To the west, there was an ocean that crested white and ebbed placid blue. All places that Chase had promised to take her,



but he had never shown her anything except stark buildings scratching a dim, gray sky.

Zoë stripped off her clingy, wet dress and pulled on a comfortable pair of baggy, black jeans and a large T-shirt, as if the loose clothing would make her less vulnerable. She knew that she had to keep Chase awake. In the past, she had read to him until her voice was hoarse. Or she had made coffee and forced him to drink it while she kept up an all-night monologue, drawing on every topic she had ever thought about. But that day, Zoë realized, it was Nigel's game. She gave Nigel the responsibility to end it.

Zoë led Chase into the living room where Nigel sat in a black leather chair, his dagger eyes fixed on the hollow glow of the TV. The room, with its dark wood floor and pale gray walls, looked even larger because it was so sparsely decorated. The TV was against one wall, separated only by a coffee table from the chair and the couch beside it. The other half of the room was completely empty. Chase sat down at the side of the couch closest to Nigel, so they could share the ashtray on the end table between them. Chase's eyes immediately latched onto the television screen. Zoë slowly lowered herself onto the opposite side of the couch, two black velvet cushions away from Chase. The volume on the television was so low that the actors on the screen seemed to be mumbling. All Zoë could hear was canned laughter that seemed to burst in perfect sync every thirty seconds. Zoë hoped that it would calm her down, and eventually she could say something to Chase or Nigel.

Chase and Nigel's side of the room quickly filled with billowing, dingy clouds that clung around the upper halves of their bodies. Zoë squinted to study them through the smoke. How nice it must be to numbly watch TV for hours, to be so oblivious that you don't even need the sound to appreciate the picture. How nice it must be to really not care. But then she caught a clear glimpse of their faces. Chase's black curls hung limply at his chin, plastered to his neck in the back. Nigel's glittering green eyes were glazed and empty. The power that Nigel usually held in his cold, sculptured face had gone slack. Usually, both Chase and Nigel towered over Zoë like grand, Chicago skyscrapers, but that day both of them hunched over, bones curving, looking eaten from the inside. Their ashen skin was like rubber stretched thin across their skeletons, accentuating hollowed cheekbones, sunken eyes. They were as colorless as the Seattle sky. Like ghouls. Like goblins. How ugly it must be to lose all your inner beauty just for a fix. It was so ugly that Zoë couldn't stand to look at it.

The first time that Chase had overdosed in front of Zoë was just a few months after the first time she saw him with a needle. That overdose had hap-

pened in Nigel's apartment in Chicago. Zoë had battered her fists against the bathroom door, covering her arms with bruises. After watching her for a moment with a twisted smile, Nigel shoved her out of the way and kicked in the bathroom door. Zoë caught a glimpse of Chase lying slumped against the bathtub before Nigel slammed the door in her face. It was a glimpse that was always the same: a peaceful expression playing across a paling face. Zoë had quickly figured out that Nigel had no way to lock the door because of the damage he had done opening it. When she charged in, Nigel was standing above Chase holding another syringe. Zoë shrieked like a sudden flash of heat lightning. Black shadows shrouded Nigel's face, but his sharp, white teeth gleamed as he chided, "Get out of here, child!" emphasizing Zoë's inexperience more than the mere two-year age difference between them. Zoë remained frozen in her spot, staring at Chase's arm, which had begun to twitch. "I said GO!" Nigel reiterated, stepping over Chase to push her out of the doorway. When Zoë held firm, he took her by the arm, pulled her down the short hallway, and forced her out of the front door. He left her tugging on the locked doorknob, banging and begging to be let in, with plump tears spattering her swollen, red cheeks.

This time she would exit with grace. She would let Nigel have Chase. And she would let them both get lost in the swirling, sheer skirts of their heroine. Neither Chase nor Nigel glanced up when Zoë left the room. And she knew that neither of them looked up five minutes later as the front door clicked behind her. The rain stung Zoë's cheeks, cold droplets quickly soaking her clothing and biting at her hands as the water in the shower had. She would head south to see the volcano Chase had promised. Then she would continue down the Pacific Coast Highway into the California sun. That was where she had needed to go for a long time.

# Texas, the Grunt

James M. Elkins

NOW, I'VE SEEN A LOT OF GREENHORNS IN MY DAY. THEY GET OFF THE BUS longhaired and spooked, not quite sure why they signed up. Most of them pasty white and stoop-shouldered, not a single soldier among them. I'm getting on up there in years, though I can still outrun, outdrink, and outcuss any raw recruit division sees fit to send my way. Nevertheless, I've seen more than a few generations of boys march through my camp and if pressed could write a history of their journey from piss-ant civilians to god-fearing, mother-loving killers in the U.S. Army. Now, you always have your characters in the army. You've got your leaders, sad sacks, juvies, and criminal types; you have the wise-crackers and rednecks, the brothers, and even the women, but in all my days I don't believe I've seen any that stood up to a boy called Texas. I'm not sure any of us ever knew his real name, seeing as his papers were always in transit, being processed, shuffled, stamped, and rerouted. All I can tell you is what I witnessed during the days he was assigned to Fort Campbell, Kentucky.

Before I get into that episode, let me first say a few things about the Camp, about myself, my staff, and a few of the things I rely on to make the transition from civilian to military life as smooth as possible.

Fort Campbell is situated in the Ohio River Valley, ten miles from the



Tennessee border. I can't say I care much for the dirt farmers or the shit heels who live and breed over in Clarksville, but the country is nice, especially for training. The fort was originally an outpost for traders and trappers on their way to the uncharted West. At one point, it was the frontier. It was used in the Civil War by both Lee and Grant at one time or another and stands today as a testament to the spirit of our great country. We have what you call a fully operational facility, which means it functions as both the Midwestern processing center for incoming recruits and as a tactical base for the advanced training of engineers, munitions storage, classroom exercises, and an assortment of other things which are classified and I cannot go into at the present moment. I have been at Fort Campbell for thirty-nine years. I've trained men for three wars and have a reputation as a hard man but a fair one as well. The great General Douglas MacArthur once commented that he'd never seen a hard case with a soft spot, smiling contemptuously and chewing on that pipe of his. I loved that man and would have ridden the A-bomb into China with him if Truman would've let us.

The first thing you have to understand is that I come from the old army. Things weren't like they are today. The men were different, they signed up for wars, lied about their age, left home as boys, sailed the Pacific, got a tattoo, came home to a raise and a family, and started a heating and plumbing business. Somewhere after Carter, all that changed with your Star Wars and laser-guided missiles. Now you've got a seventeen-year-old kid who probably couldn't do ten push-ups, sitting behind a computer screen directing half a battalion with a few flicks of the keyboard. It's a different world, I tell ya. But that doesn't stop me. I train 'em to eat beans out of a can, hump a seventy-pound sack up a hill 'til they puke, spit and polish, and stand at attention. Everyone goes through the machine the same. Nobody gets special treatment.

Of course, no man is an island. I have two enlisted men under me who help with the training and discipline and generally keep order around my part of the camp. First there's Garvey. Garvey is a lifer like myself, though his ambition has never exceeded his desire with regard to women and whiskey. He spends more time in Doc's office getting penicillin shots than any man I ever knew, from the brothels of Thailand to the stalls down in Mexico City. Garvey is a man of insatiable taste, but he can scream at a grunt 'til he nearly shits his pants, and it's good to have a man about who identifies with the less desirable impulses of the soldiers. My second in command is a boy named Ted. He's relatively new to the army and perhaps the best way to describe him is to start with his arms. Ted's arms look like tractor tires. He was a former body builder

before getting into some trouble with the law, involving prescription medication and a goat, though the record is unclear on the particulars of the matter. I keep Ted around because I once saw him pick up a full-grown dairy cow and throw it into the back of a deuce and a half. It is my experience that this type of behavior tends to inspire the men.

Now on this particular day we were to receive a fresh load of volunteers, boys and men who had signed a two-year contract with Uncle Sam. In exchange for their time, we were going to train them to kill and do it well, and then later, if they wanted to go to college, we'd pay for that. But for the next six weeks, they were mine, not yet soldiers, but no longer civilians either. Only God or the attorney general could save them once they got off that bus, or so I thought before I met Texas.

At first Texas did a hell of a job soldiering. I didn't need to know his name. I didn't need to know any of their names. Most of them I called shitbird or numbnuts, spitting these insults in their faces until they liked it. A few of them, like Tex, got nicknames. There was Ringworm and Gimpy, Slick and Mary, Fruitcake, Bugeye, and one guy I called the Pope, not because he was religious, but because I knew he joined the army straight out of the Klan. Tex shot a rifle like he was born to do it, he kept his bunk clean, his boots polished, and did a fair job on the obstacle course. I first started to realize we had a problem on the parade ground. You see a big part of the army involves marching. You march or run everywhere together, in cadence, in time, together, every man in step with the one ahead and behind and beside him. And sooner or later, just like everything else in the army, men have to be taught how to march.

It was the second week of training. We were on the parade ground, the men standing at attention. I explained in a firm and simple manner that we were going to run through some drills."

"ALL RIGHT, YOU SHITHEELS. DROP YOUR COCKS! A-TEN-HUT! YOU CALL THAT ATTENTION? YOU ARE MAGGOTS! DO YOU HEAR ME, FRUITCAKE? AN AMOEBA HAS MORE BACKBONE THAN YOU. STRAIGHTEN THAT ARM, CHIN UP, CHEST OUT. WHAT ARE YOU LOOKING AT, BUGEYE? TUCK YOUR FAT ASS IN, EYES STRAIGHT. I DON'T CARE IF YOU GOT KICKED BY TWO DONKEYS, THAT EYE WANDERS AGAIN AND YOU'LL WISH YOUR MOMMA KILLED YOU WHEN SHE DROPPED YOU. GOOD, GOOD. NOW LISTEN UP, LADIES, WE'RE GONNA MAKE THIS REEEAL EASY. LEEEEEFT FACE."

★ ★ ★

The entire platoon turned together, pivoting on one heel and coming to a rest facing left, everyone, that is, except Tex. I approached him to ascertain the nature of the problem.

“WHAT THE FUCK IS WRONG WITH YOU, SOLDIER? YOU GOT SHIT IN YOUR EARS? YOU’D BETTER HAVE, ’CAUSE I JUST ORDERED A LEFT FACE. OR MAYBE, MAYBE YOU TURNED AND THE REST OF US ARE THE ASSHOLES. IS THAT WHAT YOU’RE SAYING TO ME, BOY? THE REST OF THE PLATOON FUCKED UP? IS THAT WHAT YOU’RE SAYING? WHAT’S WRONG WITH THIS PICTURE, TEX? WHAT THE FUCK IS WRONG WITH THIS FUCKING PICTURE? I’M ONLY GOING TO SAY THIS ONE MORE TIME, AND THEN TED HERE IS GOING TO STOMP YOUR SORRY GREEN ASS.” Ted cracked his knuckles. “LEEEFT FACE.” Tex stood as before, head up, eyes forward, facing the flagpole. “I SAID LEFT FACE, PRIVATE SHITBIRD. NOW LEFT FACE.”

What happened next surprised me. I think it surprised everybody. Without moving his eyes, Texas opened his mouth and one long slow drawl said, “Sah. Nooooo, sah.” The words hung there. Until that time, I didn’t think it was possible to sustain one syllable that long. There was a stunned silence. The flag on the parade ground whipped in the wind. These weren’t words a drill sergeant was used to. These weren’t words the army was used to. I clenched my jaws until I could feel enamel on my tongue and asked him to repeat what he’d just said. And in the same mild, disinterested voice he replied, “Sah. Nooooo, sah.”

Men have all types of reactions to the army, boot camp in particular. If you think the world is not an especially fair place, then basic training is the worst kind of hell. There’s no room for insubordination. There’s no room for your opinion, your attitude, or your personality. You’re a sack of guts with a rifle. Some people can’t hack it. Fine. We put them on a bus and send them back to Evansville or Dayton or wherever it is mommas breed little failures.

I pulled Ted and Garvey aside, leaving the entire platoon face down on the tarmac poised for a few hundred push-ups.

I lowered my voice, leaning in close to the two men so it wouldn’t carry in the wind. “This has never happened before,” I sputtered.

“Permission to speak freely, sir,” Garvey said, sliding his hands behind his back and staring straight ahead, eyes focused on the hills that pushed up behind the base.

“Granted,” I hissed, waving a hand at the obvious formality.



"Discipline, sir."

"Discipline?" I repeated.

"Yes, sir. Make an example now and let the men handle it. It builds morale, sir."

"What about you, Ted? Do you agree with Garvey here?"

"With all due respect, sir, I say we stomp his ass. Take him out in the woods and frag him."

"Understood. Roger that. I think we'll hold off on that for now, Ted."

I turned back to the platoon, heads down, backs straight, a few of their arms beginning to tremble from trying to hold their noses the required three inches from the pavement.

"ALL RIGHT. SINCE PRIVATE PUSSYFOOT DOESN'T FEEL LIKE MARCHING THIS MORNING, WE'RE GONNA DO SOME PUSH-UPS. TEXAS, FRONT AND CENTER." Tex jumped to his feet, brushing pieces of loose gravel from his hands. "WELL, LADIES, YOU'RE IN FOR A REAL TREAT. TEX HERE IS GONNA SOUND OFF UNTIL EACH AND EVERY ONE OF YOU PUKES. THE LAST MAN TO QUIT GETS A PASS. EVERYONE ELSE CLEANS TOILETS FOR THE ENTIRE BASE. LET'S GO, HUT-TWO. I DON'T HEAR YOOOU."

A resounding chorus of "Yes, sirs" rang out from the assembled platoon. That was more like it. I left the men with Garvey and retired to my quarters to make my report.

After that, I began to observe Texas around the camp. He soldiered as well as any man, was strong in the arms, quick to pick up tactics, stowed his gear, cleaned his rifle, ran, jumped, humped, and saluted, in short, did all the things that were expected of him. But something was still off. Something about Texas bothered me. Anybody else I would have pinned to the flagpole. In the old days I'd broken men's jaws for not polishing buttons on their uniforms.

I started going to the gym late at night, working the heavy bag and sparring with men half my age, all the time thinking about Tex and the kind of example I should make of him. One night this nearly got me a concussion. An enlisted man slipped inside my guard and, despite the headgear, rang my bell something fierce. I backed into a neutral corner, spitting blood on the canvas. Son of a bitch, I thought. I shook my head and waded back to the center of the ring, pumping my arms and snorting. The young private was timid after that. It's not every day you brain a drill sergeant, unless of course you're a colonel. I moved slow, dropping my left hand a little to draw him in. When he was close enough, I feinted,

bobbing my head to slip his punch, and brought my right hand low under his jaw, following through with the elbow just to be sure. His eyes rolled in his head, and he fell like a stuck pig. I felt better for days afterward.

Week three, the halfway point. We'd already sent twenty guys packing, Slick and Mary and a few of the others who couldn't run, drop, salute, or make their bed the way the army demanded. I ordered Garvey to keep tabs on Texas. He reported the following: Texas didn't write letters or make phone calls; he didn't joke or play grab ass with the other men; he sat at the end of the table at chow and never left the base, not even when the platoon earned a weekend pass. And he continued to refuse to do drill formations. The men retaliated, of course, and Texas walked gingerly, eyes blackened, chest and neck bruised from the soap they'd beaten him with. Still he refused to drill.

"He refused a direct order," Garvey said to me one day.

"Goddamn, that boy's got gumption, don't he?" I said.

"Permission to speak freely, sir?"

I nodded. "He's bad for the unit, Sarge. And it's not just the marching. You send him out in the field and those guys are gonna frag him. He goes out, he won't come back. Besides that, people are starting to talk."

"Talk?" I said looking up from the papers on my desk.

I admit I protected him. I had to know why. Why would he refuse to march? He got punished. His squad got punished. It didn't make sense. Yet every time they went out on the parade ground he would just stand at attention, flatly refusing to drill. The platoon must have done ten thousand push-ups by now. Tex's voice was hoarse from sounding off. There was something else, as well, something I hadn't told Garvey or mentioned in my reports. I don't know why, but I felt a strange kinship with this soldier, his durability maybe, his doggedness, or maybe it was his honesty. He offered no quarter, and he gave none. This was a man who would fight to the death, hold the line long after the bullets had followed the cowards to the rear. He'd do that; I knew it, if only we could convince him it was worth doing.

And we could turn him around. I knew we could. These others weren't cut out for the army. They were lazy and sloppy. They had too many bad habits, and we didn't have the time or the resources to fix them all. Tex was another story. I'm not sure he was ever a civilian. Sure, he might have had a job and worn regular clothes, but there was something about the way he fired a rifle, the way he shined his boots or stood at attention on parade ground. Even in defiance he was the model soldier.

It was the fourth week of training, do or die time. You should know by now I'm a man who likes to think on his feet, improvise a little, none of this pussy-footin' around with books and charts and the right way to do things. I'm a man of action, and sometimes you gotta put your head down and charge the enemy. The first thing I did was run Tex down. I withheld food and sleep, pushed the man like he'd never been pushed before, beyond endurance and human understanding. Tex was stubborn, but he wasn't smart. He had the potential to be a good soldier. And it was my god-given duty to plunge my fist into his chest and rip that potential out of him, even if it killed us both in the process.

One night after the platoon had gone to bed I ordered Ted to go to their barracks and drag Texas into my office. Ten minutes later he stood in front of me, more asleep than awake, shivering in his skivvies. I was struck by how little there was of him, bones and bruises; he looked like a refugee, for Christsake.

"A-TEN-HUT," I said. Texas yawned and scratched a mole on his leg.

"Sarge said a-ten-hut," Ted said, hitting Texas in the back of the legs with a short piece of wood he carried tucked into the waistband of his starched pants. Tex's legs buckled, and his body snapped back rigid as a flagpole.

"That's more like it," I said, softening my voice and waving Ted out of the office. "I've been watching you, private. Watching you close. I understand your reluctance to join the team. Hell, son, we all feel that way at first. It's only natural. Why, I remember a dozen soldiers like you, smart boys, always thinking with the wrong head. Let me give you a piece of advice, son," I stepped around to the other side of my desk. "Thinking is for civilians. In the army you let the officers do the thinking for you, 'cause when you think in combat, you get zapped and your buddies get zapped. But you, you have potential, and I want to see you take some more responsibility around here." I paused, staring at Texas dead in the eyes. His body had begun to slouch, losing some of the rigidity Ted's blow had imposed upon it. I took a deep breath. "As of now I'm making you squad leader. You will be responsible for the welfare of the men in your platoon. If they fuck up, you get smoked. If you fuck up . . . well, let's just hope you don't fuck up. Do you hear me?" No response. "I said, DO YOU HEAR ME?"

"Suh. Noooo, suh." He said it like he'd had all day to think about it and just now had decided against it. I was stunned. I picked up a folding chair and smashed it into the file cabinet. I put two holes in the wall, kicked a plant across the office, and stood breathing through my nose:

"TEXAS, YOU ARE A PUKE. I WILL HAVE YOUR ASS ON A LINE, SON.



WHEN I'M FINISHED, NUNS WILL NOT PRAY FOR YOUR ETERNAL SOUL. JESUS CHRIST JUST PACKED YOUR BAGS. DO YOU UNDERSTAND ME?" Still no response. "THEY PUT SHIT IN YOUR EARS IN GEORGIA? YOU WILL BE SQUAD LEADER. YOU FUCKING-A WILL BE THE FUCKING SQUAD LEADER. DO YOU COPY?"

And then it came. I couldn't believe it. At some point Ted had entered the room. If he hadn't restrained me I'm not sure what I might have done. Texas looked straight at me, without smile or defiance, and said, "Suh. Nooooo, suh," before turning to walk back to his bunk.

The next morning I had him thrown in the brig for three days. When he came out, Texas was no better than before. If anything the jail time had the opposite effect. He didn't shower anymore; he'd stopped eating and wouldn't talk to anyone. At first the men escalated their violence, gagging and gassing and beating him. For days Texas shuffled around the base, tired and dirty and bruised. But when that didn't seem to work, the other men simply ignored him.

I pressed Division for more information about him, family, contact information, anything I could use. As it turned out they knew less than I did. They had files on all the recruits that'd sent a month ago, but nothing matched up with the description I gave them of Texas. Had he somehow slipped through the cracks? Division promised to look into it and get back to me.

I can't explain it. I've thought about it, but I don't know why I felt such compassion for this sorry grunt. I've watched good friends die with less feeling than I had for Texas. Maybe that's why I let it go on as long as I did. One day, toward the end of the fifth week, I looked out my window. The platoon was drilling, marching perfectly, stopping, turning, shouting the same cadence I'd heard soldiers shout for thirty-nine years. A feeling of pride rose in my chest. These hardly looked like the same men who stepped off the bus five weeks ago, stooped and scared, with no sense of the person next to them. Now they were a unit, acting, shitting, fighting, and learning as one. It was enough to make a man believe in God. Then there was Texas, standing in the same place next to the flagpole, his back a little less straight, his uniform wrinkled, a day's growth of hair on his face. With a heavy heart I reached into the bottom drawer and withdrew the discharge papers. I filled them out as best I could, eventually writing "Texas, the Grunt" on the top line. Next to "reason for discharge" I typed "insubordination." After all, there was the U.S. Army to think about.

Life continued for several months after that. Tex's class graduated, and another took their place. I yelled and ran and preached and punished them through the

next six weeks, carrying myself closer to winter and thinking once again of Texas. One afternoon, I pulled Garvey aside and asked if he'd heard anything.

"Sure," he said, "guy lives in town, on the streets, I hear. Saw him a few weeks ago. He was still wearing his basic greens, sitting in that park over by the river."

"And what was he doing?" I asked.

"Well, sir, nothing." I nodded and Garvey limped over to the PX for a pack of cigarettes.

I rarely went into town. This base was my home. Town was for soldiers and civilians. But one day I decided to go. I signed out a jeep from the motor pool and drove along the river, listening to police radio traffic on a scanner bolted to the console. I was a few miles from the city limits when I heard it.

"Seven-Mary-three, this is base, over."

"Base, this is seven, over."

"We have a report of a disturbance at the Wagon Wheel on Fifth and Vine. Suspect is male, Caucasian, wearing army fatigues. Reports say he is refusing to leave the premises."

I sped to the bar as fast as I could. It was an army hangout, a real shithole, two-dollar pitchers, sawdust floors, girls hanging around the alley looking for action. It didn't take long to spot Tex. He was sitting at the bar with a broken bottle in his hand, staring at himself in the mirror. The bartender stood by the cash register at the far end picking glass from his bleeding arm. A ballbat lay on the floor at his feet. I must have just beat the cops.

"SOLDIER. ON YOUR FEET. NOW, MISTER." For a minute, Tex responded. His muscles flexed, and he slid off the barstool. His hair was long, his clothes filthy, and he smelled like he hadn't washed in weeks.

"YOU ARE A GODDAMN DISGRACE, SON. LOOK AT YOURSELF. ARE YOU FUCKING PROUD? I'VE SEEN PIGSHIT THAT LOOKS BETTER THAN YOU." I heard sirens a few blocks away.

Texas wouldn't say anything. I explained to the police that he was one of ours, AWOL, blowing off a little steam. They were used to this sort of thing, said they'd let us handle it. I gave the bartender a twenty and led Texas out to the jeep. He shuffled along silently. I checked him into a flophouse across town, paid rent through the week. Texas didn't say a word. He just sat on the narrow cot scratching his beard. "I'm hungry," he finally said. "When's chow, Sarge?" I looked at my watch. "At 1700 hours, son. Get some rest. Get cleaned up." I gave the man at the desk some money on the way out. "He's a vet," I said. "Make sure he gets something to eat."

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One morning, several weeks later, I woke before reveille. Winter had come sometime during the night, dropping several inches of snow on the base. I laced up my heavy boots and zipped up an army sweatshirt, flipping the hood over my head. I headed out into the darkness, saluting back to the guards at my front gate. Fresh snow crunched under my boots, and my breath caught in my chest. I took a path along the Cumberland River, away from the base. I ran five miles before the sun began to rise and found myself close enough to town to smell the garbage. I ran on, leaving the path for the road. I jogged under the gray sky, feeling like the last man on earth. The silence of the morning was interrupted only by my breathing, the river to my left, and the occasional thud of snow falling from the treetops. I turned when I reached the gravel spur leading to a park.

He wasn't hard to spot, leaning against a rotted stump by the river, a thin army blanket pulled across his shoulders. He looked worse than before. His hair and beard had grown out. He was thin, his lips and fingernails black. I tried to catch my breath, hands on my hips. I leaned in close and touched him on the shoulder. His skin gave a little, but Tex didn't move. I helped him sit up, propping him against the stump as best I could. I brushed some of the snow from his face and hair. My hands were shaking. The smell rolled off his body. I stood for a minute watching his breath slow, then stop. A wind blew through the trees, shaking loose a tiny rain of snow. I turned and double-timed it back up the path and into town, shouting cadence to break the silence.

I wanted to give him a proper burial, a military funeral, but that sure as shit wasn't going to happen. I had his body moved to a place in town. I took some money from my army account and bought a full set of clothes from the commissary.

"But, Sarge, these ain't even your size. Hell, they wouldn't fit a grunt. Why you buying parade regalia like this for?" I signed the chit, avoiding the young soldier's eyes.

Ted and Garvey stood with me beside the grave. I'd asked them to come along. Maybe it was an order. I'm not sure. What I did know was Tex had lived and died alone and I didn't want to see him buried that way.

"He's better off."

"What's that, soldier?" I asked. "Better for who?"

"The army, sir," Garvey replied. "The boy was a misfit. He didn't want to march. Now he don't have to." Garvey spit. Ted shifted his weight from one leg to the other. It was time to go.

I've often wondered why Texas was sent to me. I know I'm getting a little old and perhaps even sentimental. I've had a good run. I did my duty, and while



I was never married, I feel like I left a legacy and had plenty of sons through the army. Still I can't help feeling that I let a few down along the way, good boys who drifted too far to the left or right. Tex was the last, and I'm sure that's part of it. But that's not the only thing. He was a test, a test I'd been preparing for all my life, and I failed.

Division finally got me that information. Texas signed up with the Dallas office, was rejected because of an earlier problem he'd had in Tucson. They wouldn't go into that with me, and I wasn't surprised. The army likes to wash its own laundry, if you know what I mean. Still, they sent me his file, and I kept it in a bottom drawer for the longest time. I retire this year, forty-five years in. I like the sound of that. Things changed after Tex died. I can't explain it. We've lost a lot of good soldiers. They're all good soldiers. But Texas was different. I was different. I think I'll take that file with me when I leave. Maybe I'll read it someday.

# The Never-Ending Memoir of a Disgruntled Foreigner

Beverly Mendoza

## I. The Last Days

YOUR LAST DAYS IN THE PHILIPPINES ARE JUST BITS OF BROKEN GLASS IN YOUR memory now, broken into sharp pieces that cut your arteries and make your story bleed into the paper like a growing stain with no shame, like the black ink of a crucifix tattoo on a gangster's back, bold and unapologetic.

You remember watching your mom pack your past and your future into three suitcases. Only three—one for you, one for your dad, and one for her, because, theoretically, your family was only going to the U.S. to visit Disney World and visit with some relatives. Just a three-week stay stamped on your visas, and you promise Mr. Immigration Sir and Ms. Embassy Ma'am, you will return, with some photographs of the Atlantic Ocean, the Magic Kingdom, and the sweet taste of America on your lips—enough to quench your curiosity. Why wouldn't you return to this beautiful, sexy island? To your Lolos and Lolas<sup>1</sup>, Titas and Titos<sup>2</sup>, and your hundred and one cousins? To a life with maids, cooks, nannies, drivers, and friends, lots of friends? And the food, how could you ever leave the land of roasted pigs, gigantic catfish, sugar canes, and sweet

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<sup>1</sup>Grandfathers and grandmothers

<sup>2</sup>Aunts and uncles

fried plantains? Of course we will come back to our home, our family, our friends, our food, our beaches, our heat—we promise. We are not poor, we don't live in squatters, nor do we scrounge for shelter in Smokey Mountain<sup>3</sup> in fact, we are wealthy. Why would we lie, why would we run away? That was your family's reasoning at the embassy, and it worked. You remember your mom packing your warmest clothes, which wasn't a lot, being that you lived on the equator. The red jumpsuit, with a Chinese girl under a yellow umbrella on the front, the one you wore when you rode horses at your family's vacation home in the mountains of Bagio—your mom folded that first and packed it. She packed photographs of her wedding, family vacations, and birthday parties, her dresses made with the best silk from China, imported makeup from Paris, your father's suits and her favorite jewelry—she packed these at the bottom of the suitcases and then covered the top with Disney World vacation clothes. Your mother is a smart woman, she thought of every angle. In case they search your suitcases in America, then the we're-just-going-on-a-three-week vacation clothes will be on top, and the permanent we're-not-coming-back possessions will be buried in the bottom.

You remember all your relatives and all the maids making a big fuss for the going-away party at your Lolo Eddie's home. You remember your cousins and you singing Madonna songs while you jumped up and down on the beds in the guest house. You remember your father getting drunk on San Miguel Beer with all his friends on the veranda, under the shade of palm leaves and all the goons (that's what your mom calls them) getting louder and louder as the night progressed. You remember hearing your mother crying in the parlor with her sisters, your Tita Nene, Tita Emmy, Tita Susan, and Tita Yolanda, sitting around her saying—Inez, you don't have to go, stay here, let *him* leave, it's *his* problem, stay.

*Him* is your dad. *His problem*, well, that's a little more complicated, they have names like Mercy, Lulu, and Corazon. They live in condominiums your father rents in the city; they call your mother in the early mornings, causing passionate fights over breakfast, fights the maids gossip about for the rest of the week.

You remember your last day at Sacred Heart when your kindergarten teacher, Ms. Santos, and all the nuns hugged and kissed you good-bye. They asked you to sing in front of the class and you, the ham that you were, did. *Tiiny bubbles, inn the wine, make me happyyy, make me feel fine, tiiny bubbles, make me warm all overrr . . .* that's what you chose as your farewell song. You were an odd child from the start.

You remember the morning you left your Lolo Eddie's house with your

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<sup>3</sup>The infamous garbage dump in Navotas, Philippines



parents. It was before sunrise, and it was comfortably cool outside. You had never been awake at that hour before, and it excited you. You remember your dad and your driver Loreda and your family's bodyguard Vic putting your three suitcases in the trunk of the car, and you and your mom sat in the backseat. You remember watching your family wave good-bye, all in unison, like a hologram postcard, getting smaller as the car backed out of the driveway. Your Lolo Eddie's red gate closed automatically when the car was clear of the driveway. Loreda, the driver, hesitated to drive away, but your mother screamed, JUST GO! and the car lunged forward down the coconut-tree-lined street.

You remember at the airport, you were carrying your doll that cried when you put her down and stopped crying when you picked her up. It was your favorite doll and the security people by the check-in station forced you to put your doll on the conveyer belt through the X-ray machine. She cried all the way down the conveyer belt, and her muffled wails made you as anxious as your parents. Your mom laughed a nervous laugh and pushed you along, and your dad carried you the rest of the way because you were walking too slow.

You remember sitting on the plane and asking your dad how long it would take to get to America. He said sixteen hours. You looked out the small port-hole window and noticed the ripples of jet steam coming out of all the airplanes. It made everything outside the window blurry. You were fascinated and also scared that Manila would soon disappear into the waves. That's all you remember. Such small fragments and you spend the rest of your life filling in the gaps and wondering why you never returned home. If you only knew that you weren't coming back, you would have tried harder to soak it all in, you would not have slept your last night there, you would have stayed awake on the plane while you traveled between two worlds, two dimensions, two lives. You wish you could remember more—the smell of your Lolo's favorite chair, Sunday trips to the country, how it felt to swim in the Pacific Ocean with all your cousins, how the sun on that side of the world feels on your back and arms (because even though it's the same sun, you just know it's different), what you dreamt about for those sixteen hours in the sky, just a little bit more.

## II. The Bus Ride Downtown

When the Santiago family first arrives in Chicago from Manila, your family stays with your Tito Ferdy and his family for a little while, until your parents get their bearing, until you started first grade. That day, your uncle takes your dad to the Board of Trade, where he works, to find him a job. And your Auntie Baby takes you and your mom downtown to find her a job on LaSalle

Street, the Mecca for administrative assistants and secretaries. Your Auntie Baby, she's been in the U.S. for ten years already, ten years in Canada, too; needless to say she's a Westernized woman, she's a downtown diva, she wears gym shoes with her gray wool suits, and over her stockinged legs, she wears bunched-up leg warmers that keep falling to her ankles. Oh, damn!, she'll say, with her flawless American accent, and pull them up every few steps she takes to the bus stop. Oh, damn! She also wears a lot of blue eye shadow and rouge; she looks like a geisha, a downtown diva geisha with gold hoop earrings and long chain necklaces. She is your fashion icon. You pray to God, you want your mom to find that fashion sense soon. You think *Wall Street*, the movie. You think *Moonlighting*, the TV sitcom. You want Bruce Willis to be your dad.

Your mom is in a silk salmon-colored dress she brought from the Philippines and a borrowed white blazer with such big shoulder pads that her head is lost in between them, so big that they look like a neck brace. She's teetering on her white stilettos. You think *Miami Vice*, but on a petite Filipino woman. You think, how embarrassing. No one looks like she does at the bus stop. They all know, they can smell an FOB<sup>4</sup> from miles away. You think the people at the bus stop smell like grass, roses, and America; the clean, crisp smell that used to rush your senses when you opened balikbayan boxes<sup>5</sup> in the Philippines, sent from San Francisco by your Auntie Rose, and you stick your head in the box and sniff. *Hmmmmmm*, smells like America, you say. The people at the bus stop smell like that, but not as potent. You realize that scent is lighter in cold air. So when did you first arrive here in America? Have you been to Disney World yet? Those are the questions those types of people ask, in slow, drawn-out speech. You think, no, that was just our decoy.

You're in your Sunday best, encased in ruffles, lace, and floral patterns. You are covered with a puffy coat you borrowed from your cousin Leah, too big, too long in the arms, you walk like the Michelin Man down the street. Black patent-leather shoes, specially made for your flat feet. Itchy all over. You constantly pull the Peter Pan lace collar away from your reddening neck and practice saying out loud in your head, Ohhh daaamn. Ohhhhhhhh daaaaaamn. Oh damn (with the long *a* like you mean it, like you hocked it up and spit it out). You finally get it right. A trickle of the Chicago accent has already infiltrated

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<sup>4</sup>Freshly off the boat

<sup>5</sup>Seventy-pound giant boxes sent from the States to the Philippines via shipping cargo with all products marked MADE IN THE USA. Products that if bought in the Philippines would cost three times as much, such as coffee and candy.

your speech. You are overbrimming with pride.

So you, your mom, and Auntie Baby stand at the bus stop. Auntie Baby is warm and toasty. You and your mom are shivering in the twenty-five-degree weather, twenty-five degrees Fahrenheit, in this country, that is. Sounds cold. Feels cold. Thirty-two is freezing, not zero. You are freezing. You are seven degrees from freezing. And you love it. Your smile is frozen on your pink face; your olive darkness fades away to something that blends with the gray buildings and the bone white sky. You are a chameleon standing and waiting for the 22 Clark bus. You imagine a jeepney<sup>6</sup> decorated in jingling trinkets and bells, statues of the Santo Niño and the Virgin Mary glued on the dashboard, purple curtains with gold tassels and stickers of the Filipino flag to cover this 22 Clark bus, just like in Manila, and a honking high horn announcing its arrival. You are a chameleon on the outside, but you still think, smell, and feel like an island tilapia fish. And the 22 Clark bus arrives. Large. Plain. White. You love this huge ambivalent vehicle. And tears begin to freeze in the corners of your eyes.

*Swoosh*, went the doors. Like Open Sesame, Mom, you say. You are delighted. You've never ridden in busses before, neither has your mom, but Auntie Downtown Diva is an expert. But you see her push past you and then move to the back of the bus without looking back. So your mom grabs your hand, and you leap up the steps and follow Auntie Baby to the back. The big blue bus driver yells, *Ain't nuttin' free in dis country, ladies!*

You think he must know, he can smell you, you know, *nuttin' free een deees countrrry!* You repeat *nuttin'* in your head. *Nuuut . . . in'*. You're a lover of language. You step back with your mom, and your mom says, *I . . . I . . . apologize, how much is the . . . uh . . . fare for two?* in her best American accent. You think, you love your mother, not bad. You hear, *What's the hold-up, lady? Jeeeesuuuuus Chrrrist! Whereda hell you from? Fuckin' foreigners! Fuckin' Chinks! Take a walk! Get a clue! All those words, all those phrases, all those colloquialisms, keep them in your mind, remember to practice them later, you note to yourself. Your eyes thaw and soak into your puffy jacket. An old lady with a corn yellow bouffant teased to perfection shows you how to slide money into the machine in front of the big blue bus driver. You want to hug the old lady. You briefly think of your Lolas in Manila.*

Your mom grabs your hand tighter as the two of you walk to the back of

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<sup>6</sup>American jeeps left over from World War II that Filipinos have inventively made into public transportation vehicles (ten passengers), decorated and painted to the max.



the bus and sit next to your Auntie Baby, whose eyes shift spastically as if she didn't know you. You sit and gather your feelings into one tight knot in your stomach and squeeze your mom's hands. On with the adventure. You look out and see CHAVO and LATIN KING with a crown on top chiseled into the window. Who is King Chavo, Mom?, you ask. Of what country? She answers, I don't know, anak<sup>7</sup>, in a trance. Down Clark Street, you see, Supermercado, 99c Mangos, Zamudio's Tires, Buy One Get One Free, Wishing Well Laundry, Bring Your Own Detergent, Swedish Bakery, Freshly Baked Toska Torte, Graceland Cemetery (you hold your breath and almost die), Greenhouse, All Flowers Must Go Now, Nuts on Clark, Mixed Nuts Liquidation, Burger King, We Serve Lunch for Breakfast – in pink, red, orange, blue bubble letters, and it reminds you of home, but it's not home, and you are suddenly delighted all over again. The knot unravels in your stomach and you breathe. Maybe you should apply there. Auntie Baby taps your mom on the shoulder and points to the Burger King, and she chuckles. You think, is that a nice restaurant? You think, maybe, Mom? Your mom squeezes your hand tighter and purses her lips, still disenchanted, her eyes glazed over. And you continue to look out the window, absorb all the colors and words whooshing past you on the 22, thinking of King Chavo and how his kingdom couldn't possibly compare to Chicago.

### III. First Tenement: Is This Our Mansion?

Your own home. The Santiagos are moving out. Your mom tells your dad, I can't live with THAT PUÑETA<sup>8</sup> any longer! THAT PUÑETA BITCH, Auntie Baby. Acts like she is some sort of queen high class, pleeez, should I remind her where she came from in the Philippines? Huh? Should I remind her that her sister was our maid? Her father made sausages at the palengke<sup>9</sup>? Her brother is in jail for drrrrugs? Should I? Your brother married a conniving whore! Puñeta!

Your mother roars like a lion and her voice trembles. Your father tries to hug her and she pushes him away. You turn up the TV and watch *Fat Albert*. HEY, HEY, HEY, IT'S FAAAT ALBERT. Louder. LOUDER. You sit twelve inches away from the TV and your father drags you by your armpits farther back. He sits on the couch and circles apartment ads in the paper.

You scoot closer to the TV and ignore your mom crying in the bedroom.

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<sup>7</sup>Child

<sup>8</sup>Bullshit

<sup>9</sup>Fresh food market with rented stalls

Your dad says, Inez, come here, I think I found one. Let's look at it today. Yeah! Yeah!, you think, let's buy our house today! It's close to here, your dad says, looking up, searching for a smile in your mom's face. Let's move back to the Philippines, mahal<sup>10</sup>, your mother says, between catching her breath. No, let's look at this one here, two bedrooms, one bath, separate dining room, galley kitchen, second floor, red brick building, no pets. Oops, no pets, guess the monkey (that's you) can't come. Funny, Dad! you say.

The three of you leave Auntie Puñeta Bitch's house and walk four blocks west and arrive on Greenleaf Street. You notice this big red building jutting out on the corner. Bigger than every other home on the street. Windows so abundant, you stop counting after nineteen. Big wooden doors every half block. The grass is cut into perfect square patches. So green. Sprinklers on every square. Flower beds, so magenta, so purple, so perfect, perfect, perfect. You follow the stone path that leads to a courtyard. Oh, damn!, you think, it's your very own garden with rectangle-shaped bushes that line the horseshoe-shaped building and dome trees and more squares of grass. And the windows have multiplied. This is way bigger than Auntie Puñeta Bitch's little house on the corner. How many bedrooms can you have? One for each night of the week to sleep in? For each night of the month? FOR EACH NIGHT OF THE YEAR? Holy Moly! Oh, damn! Daddy, is this our mansion? Can we afford this, you ask, and don't listen to the reply because you're picking out your bedroom decorations, the big pink Hello Kitty doll that will sit right in the smack-dab middle of one of your 365 beds. No more sharing with fat-ass, blanket-hog Leah. No more snoring, oink oink pig. And then you hear your mom howl. A laugh so deep, it must have come from Beijing, China. She hasn't laughed like that since Manila, since sitting around with her sister on wicker lawn chairs, in your old garden, by the orchids, in her sundress. Perfect, perfect, perfect.

A man in a long brown Brillo wool-pad-looking beard and lumberjack clothes comes walking towards your dad and shakes his hand. Hello, Mr. Santiago, Mrs. Santiago, I'm Ralph. Whatdya think of the courtyard? Perfect, perfect, perfect. You think, Dad can live on the third floor, I on the second floor, and Mom on the first floor. That way there will be no noises. Freedom. A TV in every room, of course. The American Dream, you are living the American Dream, a term you just learned in American History class. Why, Ralph, this is more than I can ask for, you say in your head, with the elegance of Joan Collins in *Dynasty*. Let's take you up to the second floor. Newly renovated. Just

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<sup>10</sup>Love

painted. Just carpeted. It should be a perfect size for the three of you. Yes, Ralph, perfect, perfect, perfect.

The four of you walk up the creaking wooden stairs and immediately the spicy aroma of curry from the Patel family's first-floor apartment assaults your senses. It makes your mouth water and the hairs rise on the back of your neck. You notice a family of shoes neatly placed side by side outside their door on a WELCOME straw doormat. You think, must be the maid's quarters, right? You continue on up the stairs to the next landing. Here we are, says Ralph. Just to let you know, across the hall are Filipino tenants too. Two women, been living here for a coupla years. Ralph leans close to your father and whispers, I think they're lesbian lovers! You notice your dad's eyes grow even larger. You slide your eyes over to your mom, and she doesn't notice a thing, she seems to be eyeing the paint chipping from the walls and the tattered carpet on the stairs. Later, you will learn that Ralph was correct, when Lani and Marleta reveal their loving partnership to your mother over some Miller Lite in broad daylight. You remember it was daylight because you remember thinking that secrets like that should only be told in the dark, at night, preferably, in a smoky room.

Ralph fiddles with the keys for a while and finally, you enter the room. It's exactly how the ad in the newspaper described it. You think, not a bad size for a bedroom. Your mother swallows hard. It is painted all white and the fumes inside are still vinegary. The carpet is of a champagne color, new and stiff. The bathroom is horrendously white, and the bathtub is mildewy around the edges, and the dripping faucet needs to be fixed. Your father keeps nodding his head each time he enters a room. OK, Ralph, we'll take it, your dad says, without even looking at your mom. It didn't matter anyway because she has already walked out of the apartment and is standing in the hallway while Ralph was opening the cupboards and the shivering yellow refrigerator to show your dad how clean the last tenants left it.

You never fully realize that this "bedroom" is your entire home. Not until you move and you ask your mother to see the rest of the house. She laughs one of those deep laughs again when you ask, but this time the laugh sounds bitter.

#### IV. Thanksgiving Day Sardines

Their first Thanksgiving and the Santiagos have no turkey. In fact, our parents really didn't understand the concept of Thanksgiving. You learned all about the Pilgrims and Indians and the *Mayflower* in class, and you've cut out turkeys from flimsy construction paper, in fact your turkey, who you named Pete, won first prize, a blue ribbon. You've heard about the football games and how dads



and uncles will watch and holler and moms and aunties will cook and gossip, you've heard of stuffing and sweet potatoes, and cranberry sauce and the works, but you never told your parents. You expected them to just know—they are all-knowing, are they not? Your mother is smarter than Alex Trebek. She knows every answer on *Jeopardy!* without having the cards right in front of her. Your dad, he's a huge history buff. He must know about American history and culture? You weren't given a handbook of How To Act American, or How To Celebrate American Holidays Without a Hitch, or better yet How Not To Act Like You're Freshly Off the Boat. You're learning as you go, too. So when your English teacher, Ms. White, who got married to Mr. Wright, so it's Mrs. Wright now, asks your class to write about your Thanksgiving when you get back from break, you write your first-ever fictional masterpiece. You write about the yummy spread of food and how your made-up family sat around the table and sliced the twenty-pound turkey and passed the green beans and potatoes around the table and how everyone had to unbutton their pants to make room for the pumpkin pie. It was a feast for kings and queens, you write.

But your Thanksgiving was really spent walking down Howard Street with your mom and dad to Kentucky Fried Chicken. When you arrive there you see that it's closed. You notice how every shop has the iron gates across their doors and windows with shining silver padlocks on them. So uninviting. No one was outside, really. Then you decided to walk down farther to look for one open restaurant and everything is closed. The only day you have off from school, the only day your dad doesn't have to work, the only day your mom isn't working her two jobs, and there's nothing to do. So you look into windows of houses on your walk back home and you're just feeling so ungrateful, so un-Thanksgiving-like. Families are gathered around televisions with sagging paper plates in hand. Fathers are drinking beer and hugging their sons. Mothers are putting on their pearl earrings while they stir their pots of cranberry sauce. A few teenagers, girls and boys, are throwing the football around the lawn. Dogs lie flat on the porch chewing on some rawhide bones. Yellow leaves, red leaves, orange leaves cover the sidewalks. An older man with a long plaid scarf is raking his front yard, and he says hello to your family, gorgeous day! And you muster up the energy for a fake smile along with your parents. Everything is so beautiful outside. And you do get a sense that today is a special day. There is a lighter feeling in the air, people are happy in the world today. Everyone but you. Why didn't you tell your mom about the turkeys and everything?

You get back home after your pointless journey and you are starving. No one has called to invite your family over for Thanksgiving. NO MESSAGES

the drone voice says and mocks you when you press play on the answering machine. Everyone is busy giving thanks for overstuffed fowl. You flip on the TV and watch the Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade with floats of turkeys and Charlie Brown. Celebratory confetti covers the streets and you look out the window and see nobody. The commercial breaks are even worse, because everyone is dressed in red fluffy sweaters and there are Sales Galore!, After-Thanksgiving Sales! And you realize that everything is open tomorrow, not today, but it's too late, because your dad and mom have to go back to work, anyway. Your mom calls you from the kitchen and says time for lunch, and your heart sinks when you see that she's opened up a can of sardines and cooked a pot of rice. I'll shop tomorrow, she says, nothing is open today, as if she had to explain. You took that walk, too. You know nothing's open! Your dad sits at the head of the table, and you all dig in. You are on the brink of crying but something takes you over and you poke at the sardine with your fork and put it on your plate and pretend you're carving it with your pretend knife in one hand and your fork in the other. You look up from your concentrated mime act and a smile spreads on your face. Your parents look at each other and start laughing. You all start to talk about the Philippines and your cousins and aunties and how they would laugh and laugh and laugh when you write them and tell them all about this. They don't celebrate this holiday in the Philippines, your mom says, justifying your meager spread on the table. Next year, anak, we'll have turkey, OK? she says. And she smiles. It all begins to dawn on you. The theory of Thanksgiving. And you feel it. And how if someone was looking into your window from the sidewalk, they would see a family celebrating just like everyone else, laughing and eating and drinking, with the TV blaring in the background, and unless they look really close, they wouldn't know that you were eating from a can of sardines. And you feel all right.

#### V. Blonde Ambition

Annie Fitzgerald, your best friend since your first day of school when she saw something deep within your soul, a potentiality to be cool, and let you sit next to her and her popular friends, the Pachelbel Canon in D expert, the girl who smells like fresh-cooked bread, the girl who has been to ALL FIFTY STATES, even Alaska, with her lawyer parents and an older sister who goes to Yale, the parents *kinda* related to the Kennedys, she is a classic blonde and all the teachers at St. Augustine's love her. Even Sister Shields, the meanest nun you ever encountered, even meaner than the mustached nuns with rulers at Sacred Heart in the Philippines, the meanest nun on earth still likes Annie

Fitzgerald. You? Well, Sister Shields just smirks and glides down the hallway, almost knocking you down. Your gym teacher, Mr. Blazowski, blushes when he has to tell Annie Fitzgerald to take the gum out of her mouth. He never blushes when he yells at you. You get the spray of spittle coming out of his mouth soiling your face like a spring day shower. Annie Fitzgerald gets to be the runner, Sister Shield's special assistant. She gets to come to homeroom late and leave last period early so that she can run notes and memos and announcements to the teachers.

One day, while you were in religion class with Ms. Curry, ex-nun, you are sitting behind Claudius Howard, just hitting puberty, poor Claudius. Big ears, big hands, big feet, big Afro hair, big forehead, the tallest kid in the class, highest voice in the class and thinnest frame. You are just learning about how Judas betrayed Jesus. But you aren't really paying attention because Claudius has major body odor. And you feel faint; you feel like a skunk is lurking around you, and you're still so short that your nose is exactly aligned at his armpits. Annie Fitzgerald walks in and you two give each other a look, a bubbling smile, rolling your eyes, a thank-God-you're-here look that only best friends would know, and she hands off a pink folded note to Ms. Curry. You want Annie to just sit next to you so you can smell fresh-cooked bread, but she leaves, her blond shiny hair swinging, like only blonde shiny hair can swing, like the commercials with Heather Locklear and Christie Brinkley—not one strand out of place, swing, swing.

Lillian, your mother is in the office to see you. Get your books and meet her there, the ex-nun orders. Your feelings toward her are dubious, because she is an ex-nun, and so your heart beats a little faster and you gather your Bible, Let Jesus Live in Your Heart Workbook, Catholicism Handbook, and your green Trapper Keeper with puppy Labradors on the front, and you leave the room. You notice that the skunk stayed inside. Praise the Lord! And you breathe in the Crayola and Elmer's Glue air of grade-school hallways.

You see your mother sitting in the office, clutching her purse and talking to Annie. You grow increasingly jealous of this sight. You wonder if your mother thinks Annie's hair is prettier than yours when she tries to braid it in the morning, when your hair becomes limp and disobedient and escapes from the vicious tight grasp of your mom's braid. There's an emergency with your father, we have to go, she says when she sees you standing in the doorway, undoubtedly with a sour look on your face. And so you leave. You look back and give that call-me-later-after-school look to the blonde and beautiful Annie Fitzgerald.

What's wrong with Dad, Mom? you ask. He's too young to have a heart



attack, maybe he was hit by a car. Mom? you ask again. Oh, he's going to see THAT WOMAN again, I know it, your mom answers. We will follow him, catch him. Hurry up. Put on your seat belt. She pulls the seat belt over you and snaps it shut. THAT WOMAN=the elusive hanger-upper. You've picked up the phone before on Saturday nights, watching *Saturday Night Live*, and that THAT WOMAN would hang up on you several times. You've been home sick from school and THAT WOMAN would linger in silence on the phone until you sniffly say again for the third time, Hello? and then she hangs up on you.

So you're with enraged mother following secretive father to the rendezvous with the infamous hanger-upper. You have never, ever, wished until that moment, to be back in religion class, learning about Judas and smelling skunk under Claudius Howard's armpits. Your mom parks on Inner Lake Shore Drive when it turns into Michigan, right in front of the Drake Hotel. You sit in your car with your mother, scared to move your head left and see how your mother is looking, scared to move your head right, out the window, to possibly see your father with THAT WOMAN. You two sit in silence. Except sometimes she starts complaining about what a bastard your father is. Walang hiya, no shame, she would say. But most of the time is passed in sharp, sharp silence. So you don't move your neck. Instead you look over the dashboard and watch groups of older matrons and tourists slipping into cabs. But sooner or later your neck twists, a masochistic habit of yours, and you see your father walk out of the hotel, arm around the waist of THAT WOMAN. And guess what? She's blond and her hair swings just like any blonde's hair would. Your mother cries. Anak, look! She is pute! She is white. Walang hiya! You think, I hate my black hair. I hate it. You worry that you won't be able to watch TV tonight, because you'll be sent to your room again while they fight and fight and fight. You don't even know what this one's name is, and you don't care. You begin to plan dying your hair blonde tomorrow.

You won't call Annie Fitzgerald tonight; you won't take her calls either, you decide.

## VI. The Nina Situation

Your Uncle Gil, he's a surgeon and a womanizer, but he's also married to your Aunt Bella. They live in a very nice house in Highland Park, where the rich Jewish people live, your mom says. Their house is unlike any Filipino home you've ever seen. The sofas aren't covered in plastic. There aren't gaudy gold-and-white lamps in every corner. Statues of the Santo Niño and crucifixes aren't haphazardly decorating walls and tables. There's no giant fork and spoon over the buffet table. Plastic runners are not covering the shag white carpets. It

is classy, you could say. Brown leather couches. Clean lines. Wooden everything. You know, furniture that stands proudly, not furniture that hides behind chipping paint, a fake bravado of sprayed-on gold. Well, anyway, your Uncle Gil has many nurse girlfriends. He's a playboy, your mom and aunts say behind Uncle Gil's and Aunt Bella's backs. He is *sooo* talented as a surgeon, your father would tell you. Both of his hands are insured for hundreds of thousands of dollars. Ohhh pleeeez, your mother says, that man is nothing but a gigolo. But you believe it.

Your Uncle Gil introduces your father to Nina, a Puerto Rican nurse at his hospital, an ex-girlfriend, too. They set up an arranged marriage so that your dad can get his Green Card already and petition for your mom and you, so that you don't have to be constantly paranoid about being caught, deported, humiliated. So your mom and dad get "divorced" even though your family still lives together. Nina and your father meet all the time and practice their answers together to prepare for interviews with the INS officials. Your mom makes you go with them to their meetings, because she doesn't really trust your dad.

You usually meet in this hole-in-the-wall Mexican restaurant in Logan Square in the middle of the afternoon so it's not so crowded. You sip your favorite drink of all time—horchata, that milky rice water—and listen and observe. They practice their answers to the silliest questions like, What type of toothpaste do you use? (Crest). What side of the bed do you sleep on? (Dad on the left, Nina on the right). Is he left handed or right handed? (right). What color eyes does she have? (hazel). What's his favorite meal? (porterhouse steak and rice). What shows do you watch on TV? (Dad, NBA basketball and golf only, Nina, *L.A. Law*)—silly questions like that. There are also the big ones like, How did you meet? Tell me about her parents? What sort of education did he have? Those require more elaborate answers, and both of them take notes on yellow legal pads. In the first few meetings Nina wears her nurse uniforms, but towards the end, right before the interview, she starts dressing in tight colorful tops and putting blush on her cheeks. No matter how much makeup she wears, your mom is always prettier, and you make sure to tell your mom that, too. You also make sure to tell your mom that she stays on her side of the table at all times and that it is all business. Nina always tries to avoid eye contact with you; you know you make her nervous by just staring at her with your scowl, kinda like a guard dog. Your family isn't very worried about your dad answering the questions wrong. It is Nina, she is nervous and she can't lie very well. Your dad, he's the best liar in town, that's what your Uncle Gil says, NATURAL BORN, BABY!

It was pretty much smooth sailing from then on. INS bought into it. But

one day, Nina freaked out. Your Uncle Gil told your dad that she started threatening to tell your Aunt Bella about their affair if he didn't start seeing her again. She asked for more money from your dad on Monday. On Wednesday, she said she wanted a divorce. On Friday, INS paid your house a visit around midnight and searched through all your belongings. Luckily, your mom and you were visiting your Auntie Rose in San Francisco. Weird luck, right? Your dad tried to explain about your belongings in the drawers by saying that your mom left them behind when she divorced him. Your mother's clothes could have very well been Nina's. Pictures of your dad's and Nina's civil service wedding were framed and decorated the night table and mantel in your home, despite the fact that it nearly drove your mom mad. The real wedding pictures were hidden at your Uncle Ferdy's. Any identification or record of your family's life together was scattered and hidden in various locations, never in your own home. Your dad managed to lie very well and play it cool. The INS officials seemed to buy it, until your dad got a letter in the mail saying his marriage was under investigation. Here we go again, your mom would say to your dad, bad luck followed you across the Pacific Ocean. What are we going to do now? Just wait, your dad would answer.

That night you lay in your bed thinking of getting deported. You've heard stories of people being put on the plane in handcuffs for the whole sixteen-hour flight. You wonder how they drink their drinks and how they eat their peanuts. What would happen to all your possessions? Who would take care of your parakeets, Molly, Jerry, and Cindy Lauper? Would they survive outside if you set them free? What would all your teachers and classmates at school think? One day you're studying the Constitution and the next day you're absent, and the next, and the next, until all the nuns start wondering where you are. Would they announce it on the PA? Lili Santiago was an illegal alien. She was caught and brought to jail and deported. You will never see that criminal again. Sorry for the interruption, continue on with your studies. God bless you, children, and God bless America, one of the sisters would say. Would your friends cry? Would they be embarrassed that they were friends with a criminal? Would they be angry that you never told them? Or would they just forget you and replace you with any other new girl who transfers into your school, probably some public-school tramp? You plan to prepare your friends slowly for your possible deportation. You figure that tomorrow you'll start telling them that your dad is really in the CIA, they mustn't tell anybody! And maybe in the near future you'll just vanish with your family. They'll believe you, because like your dad, you can lie very well, NATURAL BORN BABY!



You realize how easily you can just disappear here in the States. Just disappear, as if you never existed. And it got you thinking of the Philippines and trying to remember your last days there, because these may be your last days in America. Any time now, you'll be pulling a David Copperfield. POOF! You're gone. You're a ghost.

# Rodeo Boys

Ryan Brown

I NEVER REALLY LIKED SLEEPING OVER AT MY GRANDMOTHER'S HOUSE. SHE really wasn't my grandmother. She was Perry's mom, so legally she would have been labeled my stepgrandmother; at the age of seven, legality was the least of my worries. It wasn't that I didn't like going over there—because sometimes I even wanted to go over there; I just didn't want to sleep there.

My cousin Roy lived there, too. Roy's father, Big Roy, worked with the rodeo, roping cattle, riding bulls and horses, driving big rigs from city to city; he wasn't around very much. Roy's mom, Jen or Gwen or Lynn or something like that, left before Roy and I became stepcousins.

Roy wanted to be just like his daddy. There wasn't a game that we would play that didn't involve some aspect of rodeo life. We would wheel each other around on kitchen chairs, the rider spurring the underside, holding on with one hand while the other arm flew wildly back and forth overhead until ultimately he was violently thrown to the tiled floor. The only thing to do at that point would be to get up, dust off your trousers, and watch your back, because a bucking steer doesn't just walk away after he throws you. It was more than once that I caught a chair frame to the mouth by not getting up fast enough. I tolerated the rodeo games as long as we got in a fair amount of time jumping

the dirt ramps in the trails behind the house on our bikes. We never stayed on the trails long though; Roy's bike was too old to sustain that kind of pressure. Something would always happen: the handlebars would crash down, the chain would keep slipping, or the tires would wobble. He probably loosened every nut and bolt on the thing before I would come over because, without fail, his BMX would need to be walked home after fifteen minutes. The bikes would be propped up against the old shed, and we'd get right back to roping bushes, riding chairs, and driving the couch . . . sorry, eighteen-wheeler, to whatever city needed a rodeo that day. Real rodeo men earn prize money, pretend rodeo boys get nothing but trouble. Rodeo boys follow rank. Roy was older than me, bigger than me, and he lived there. No matter how equal we were in the disasters, it was always my fault. The story never came out, "We busted the gate," "We shredded through the flower garden," or "We scratched the Buick." Never. Roy always started those tales with "He," and ended them with a long, bony, brown finger—the nail encrusted with the dirt of a hard day at play—pointing right at me.

I'd be bent over the couch, stripped down, and wailed on with an instrument constructed solely to correct the misbehaviors of a young rodeo boy. It was a solid piece of leather, three inches wide, one inch thick, and two feet long. It was rigid enough to lean against the hall closet door and stand up straight; it might as well have been made of wood. It was dense all the way through except for the dime-sized holes on one end. It looked like a belt that had gone terribly wrong. With my head buried into the center cushion of the plastic-lined, speckled-green couch, I would listen for the swishing sound of the air being forced through the five holes until it would collide with my bottom, my flesh pouring through those five holes until it was pulled back, raised high, and swung down again. My grandmother may have looked like a frail woman, but with such an instrument of war in her hand, she possessed the strength of the toughest bronco rider there was.

I knew how to keep out of trouble most days: stay relatively quiet, don't break anything, and don't bother her while she was "on her machine." My grandmother's kidneys hadn't worked since I'd known her, so every four hours she'd be hooked up to her dialysis machine. During the day, the times that she was on her machine would be the times that we used for exploring. A basement is just a basement until you're not supposed to be there. Sneaky rodeo boys with scabbed knees and curious minds, we'd rummage through every stored box, stacked crate, and dusty suitcase until her machine dripped dry. The daytime was innocent; what boy didn't get into things that he wasn't supposed



to? The night was another story.

"Roy?" she'd call from the back bedroom in her rural-Mississippi drawl.

"Ma'am," he'd answer back from the living room. Roy hadn't lived anywhere but the suburbs of Chicago, but his speech was just as drawn out and Southern as the rest of the household's.

"I'm goin' on my machine. Y'all go on to bed now. Don't be keepin' up no noise out there." That would be the last we'd hear from her each night besides her slippered feet shuffling on the hardwood floors.

"Yes, Ma'am," he'd reply, while heading for the front closet which housed our bedding for the night. Though he lived there, he slept on the couch. Roy was skilled in covering it with sheets, blankets, and pillows in forty-five seconds flat. The lights would be turned out, and we'd lie, top to toe, on what earlier had been a semi-truck. It wouldn't take long before I'd hear Roy's Mississippi whisper, "You sleep?"

"Almost," I'd lie.

"I wanna practice. Come down on this end."

"No, Roy, I'm going to sleep."

"Come on. We don't have to practice for a long time. How you ever goin' to know how to do it, if you don't practice?"

"I don't want to practice, and I'm telling Granny if you don't leave me alone."

"Go ahead. You ain't gon' do nothing but get both of us whupped."

Roy was merely an outline of a boy as he stood above me in the darkness of the room. His tree-climbing-callused hands grabbed the back of my head and pulled my face to him. His already-erect penis touched my lips and slid into my mouth. As he thrust himself inside of me, he called me his wife and told me he loved me. Rolling me onto my stomach, he pulled off my He-Man Underoos and lay prone atop my board-like body. Resting his juvenile penis between my buttocks, he rocked back and forth, moaning softly in my ear. I lay quietly on our semi-truck of a bed and wished to be at home: at home with my racecar wallpaper, at home with my television and Atari, at home in my king-sized bed . . . alone. He gyrated his hips a while longer, then stood at the side of the couch. His figure spoke down to me, "See. It wasn't nothing but a little bit of practice. Next time, you can be the husband."

I fell asleep, staring at the glimmer of the streetlight through the sheer curtains, my knees pulled tightly to my chest, wishing I was at home.

I went by three names when I was growing up, depending on who was talking to me. At school, I was Ryan. At home, I was Ry, and when my mom's

brother, Frank, was around, I was Ry-Baby. More people than I liked to called me Ry-Baby, but only Uncle Frank said it the right way, speaking with his original street-gangsta tongue, stretching it out long enough to pick me up and spin me in a full circle before finishing the word. As silly as I thought it was at the age of eight, I secretly liked it.

"What's up, Ryyyyyyyy-Babyyyyyyy?" Uncle Frank said, swinging me through my grandmother's living room. "What you doin' in here all by yo' self?"

"Watchin' TV," I answered, without looking up.

"Ain't you 'spose to be doin' some homework or somethin'? How you gon' be somebody someday if you just sit here watchin' TV all day?"

"I can be somebody and still watch TV."

"Yeah? What you wanna be? What job you gon' get that you can just sit and watch TV?"

"Ummm. . . I'm gonna be a fireman, like my dad, or a dancer like on *Fame*." I smiled, adult teeth filling my mouth. I was thinking, I told you.

His hardworking janitorial hands ran through his thick wavy hair as he stared down at me. His voice was gravelly and cold when he spoke. "Boy, only girls and sissies are dancers. Go do yo' homework." He turned off the television and stood in front of it until I made a move toward my backpack. He took the Kool cigarette from behind his ear and put it between his lips. It jumped up and down as he spoke. "Ry-Baby, firemen always do their homework." He turned the handle on the big wooden door and walked out.

I didn't understand what the big deal was. Some days I felt like a dancer. Other days I felt like a fireman.

Myisha and I became a couple by default, each of us following someone else; Keith, my best friend, and Tawana, Myisha's little sister, were our unlikely leaders. Our relationship spawned and developed out of sheer proximity. Our high school freshman romance was rather typical: school, mall, phone, repeat daily. The only thing that kept us from being like Keith and Tawana was that we weren't doing *it*. Not that I hadn't tried. I was fourteen years old and ready to do *it* anytime she wanted. I was ready to do *it* anytime anyone wanted, but she wasn't ready. I respected that. Technically, at fourteen, you really don't respect that decision, you merely accept it; I accepted it because I had no other choice. Until that night.

"Just keep the change," I told the cab driver as I was getting out the back door.

"Yeah . . . thanks," he mumbled as he pushed the little black buttons on the meter on the dashboard.

Myisha and Tawana's house was on the corner of their block, next to an empty lot. A few years prior, that empty lot was a house similar to the rest of the houses on the block. Weather, time, and neglect had taken its toll on the dwelling, until the city came and tore it down to the foundation. Myisha's dad said he'd have torn the eyesore down himself if they hadn't come and done it. Now in its place lay a field of rubble: rocks and broken bottles. I got out of the car three houses down from the vacant lot; I didn't want her parents to see me across the lot and ruin my chances of doing *it*.

Broken glass reflected the light of the streetlamp as I searched for rocks small enough to toss at Myisha's second-story window. "What are you doing down there?" she asked me in a rushed whisper, peering through the screen with squinted eyes.

"I came to see you."

"Hold on. I'll come down." Within a minute she emerged from the house with a bag of garbage. "Come on, but be quiet." I followed closely behind her to the alley, where she put the decoy trash in the can. "My parents are in their bedroom. If we're really quiet, we can sneak into my room." Her bedroom was nothing new to me. I'd made it in and out of there safely, dozens of times. Tonight was going to be different, though. One way or another, I was going to convince her that we should do *it*.

Her house was old, not the type of old house that you see in historic districts, but the other kind: run-down and needing repair. Everything in that house made noise: the doors squeaked, the windows rattled, the floorboards crackled. If you moved within the walls of 1357 Ironwood Avenue, everyone inside knew about it. We stood at the door a moment before walking in. She spoke inches away from my face, "When I open the door, we have to run right up the stairs and into my room. Stay right behind me. One. Two. Three." The door swung open and slammed shut with just enough time for me to slide through. She hurdled three steps at a time with her long, thin legs; I matched her stair for stair. My entire body pulsed with my heartbeat until I sat comfortably on her bed behind the locked door and not a part of me touching that creaking floor.

She leaned against the back of the door, drowning in her brother's triple XL Riley High School T-shirt and men's boxer shorts. "What are you doing here?" Her voice was nearly inaudible.

"I came to see you." My puberty-stricken voice, almost incapable of whispering, cracked, raising in pitch and volume.

"Shut up!" she mouthed, running to the boom box, which sat on her



dresser. She turned on the radio to cover our voices; Wreckx N Effect's, "Rump Shaker" was on. I loved that song. "All I wanna do is do my zoom zoom zoom in your boom boom. Just shake your rump."

She sat down on the bed in front of me and just stared. I leaned closer and kissed her lips. She didn't hesitate to kiss me back. Her hands came up and touched my face. Slowly pulling away from her kiss, I sat across from her and took in her entire body: her thick curly hair, her thin nose and full lips, her small shoulders, her still-growing breasts, slender legs, and light brown complexion. Her father stood over six feet with knotted black hair and skin like midnight, while her mother just crested his chest and had flesh that was milky and appeared translucent. Their opposites and contrasts created what I had come to know as the most beautiful person I'd met in my fourteen years. My lips formed into a smile as I absorbed all of what she was giving me just by being there in front of me. My hands explored her thin frame as hers did mine. She lay back on the bed. With my hands on either side of her, I had leverage enough to hold myself over her. Hovering, I kissed her lips, then her neck, then her ear. Whispering as best I could, I breathed, "Let's do it."

"I don't think I can," she answered after a gentle kiss.

"Yeah, you can. If your little sister can do it . . ."

"I don't know." Her hands fell from me and covered her face.

"Don't worry," I said, trying to sound reassuring and confident, while my hand slid into her panties and found her wetness. One piece at a time I disrobed both of us, until our naked forms lay together on the afghan that covered her bed, with only the light of the streetlamp in front of the vacant lot to illuminate the scene.

As I squeezed my hips between her thighs, she spread her legs reluctantly. Leaning on one arm, I aimed my manhood in the right vicinity as best I could in the dim light and plunged into her tightness with as much force as needed to enter. Her fingers dug into my shoulders as her entire body tensed into an unyielding stiffness. Her eyes squeezed shut and her thin nose crinkled. I pushed farther inside of her. I found pleasure within the folds of her warmth. In agonizing silence she lay on her back, body clenched, hands flat against my unformed chest, until I finished and pulled out of her.

Together we slept, her back to my chest, both sets of knees spooned and pulled up, until the glow of the vacant lot's streetlamp was overcome by morning light.

At fourteen, living in South Bend, I couldn't be controlled by anyone. My

mom, sister, and I had made a quick getaway from the abusive drunk she married after divorcing Ralph, my real dad. The apartment complex that we lived in gave me a direct link to whatever kind of trouble I wanted to get into with my newfound freedom, and what else was there to do in “The Bend” except hang out with Notre Dame students? Nothing. Did it matter that I was only a sophomore in high school? Certainly not. I could hit a bowl harder than most of those college kids. Only problem was, I hadn’t built up my tolerance to alcohol yet, so I was constantly passing out on somebody’s couch. The guy that lived downstairs from us, John, partied all the time. Without fail, I could find something to get into down there.

One Friday, my friend Keith and I rushed home from school, dropped off all of the work that we definitely weren’t going to do, and went straight downstairs to John’s. He was in there smoking up with a few guys that I didn’t know. Keith smoked a little, but I passed on it. I always ended up puking when I mixed my poisons, and I was looking to hit the bottle that night.

I hadn’t acquired a taste for beer yet, but everything eighty-proof went down fine. I just took long swigs on the bottle, clenched my eyes shut, drew my lips together, balled up my fists, felt the burn roll down my chest and incinerate my insides, then released all of that tension with a fiery exhale of little-boy breath tainted with the sweet taste of rum, vodka, whiskey, or gin. Over and over I lifted that bottle to my lips. My arms got weaker each time. My eyes closed a little more with each taste. My tension faded away the more I drank. The burn was merely a trickle down my throat by the end of the night, 8:30. Life went on around the high-school kid passed out on the couch.

Keith went home. Well, not exactly home. He went upstairs to my room, and passed out in my bed, expecting me to just stay on John’s couch until the morning. By the time I woke up about to puke on the carpet, there was no one left in the living room, except Earl, a new face in the crowd. He was just as new the second time I met him that night, when I came back from the bathroom. My eyes still watering from dry heaving, he sat on the couch with a glass of water, holding it out to me. “Here, drink this,” he said.

“It’s water, right?” I had to ask.

“Yeah, it’s water.” He was sitting on the center couch in the horseshoe formation of three couches John had arranged in his living room. “Sit down, dude.” He must have noticed all of the wobbling I was doing on my unsteady, drunken legs. I fell heavily on the couch, spilling all but the bottom of the glass of water. “Here. Give me that. I’ll get you more.” He took the glass from my hand and walked into the kitchen. In the few seconds it took for him to return,

I had lain down and balled up on one end of the couch closest to the window. He sat down next to me and pulled me into a sitting position. I took the glass from him and began to drink. He held his hand inches from the glass as I drank; his other hand ran up and down my back in a soothing circular pattern. I didn't drink much of it. Just enough to rid myself of the taste in my mouth.

"Thanks," I said, setting the glass on the floor in front of the couch.

"You feel better?" he asked, still rubbing my back.

"A little. I'm just drunk and tired."

"Just lie down and sleep it off." I lay down and closed my eyes, his hand still rubbing my back. I faded away.

My eyes snapped open when I felt foreign hands in my pants. A looming half-clothed figure hovered over me, stroking himself with one hand, exploring little boy flesh with the other. He registered no surprise, no shock, no guilt or shame. A sideways grin spread across his thick lips. His roaming hands continued to fondle while my brain registered what my body already knew.

No words were spoken. I leapt from the couch, causing the room to spin in colored ovals. The door was far. There were obstacles. The water spilled. The stairs were steep. The hallway was bright. It swelled and shrunk with every quick breath I took.

Our apartment was dark, and though my head knew the way, my legs took alternate paths, left and right, into and on top of things that were not in the way. My bedroom light sobered me. Keith lay unmoved atop the comforter, still dressed in his jean shorts, Miami Hurricanes jersey, and gym shoes.

"Keith, Keith," I whispered, pulling his arm. The closest thing I got to a response was a garbled, "What the fuck, man," before he rolled over and faced the other direction.

After turning off the light, I grabbed my pillow out from under his head, cursing him for being there, and lay on the floor. I didn't cry; I just lay on my back staring at a familiar sky through a rain-streaked window.

The October breeze wrapped around me and squeezed my lungs, making each breath harder to take than the one before. I stood in front of Mall Entrance One, waiting for Mom to come and pick me up from work. The endless folding of sweaters and khaki pants, sustaining that fake smile and pleasant attitude, and late nights were completely outweighed by my employee discount. Fashion over function was always the way I dressed myself, so there I stood, my sixteen-year-old bones quivering beneath discounted purchases because I didn't have a coat that matched my shoes. Regardless of whether I'd worn a coat or not, my



mother was still ten minutes late picking me up from work.

We drove in silence for nearly two minutes before she reached over and turned the radio down. "I talked to Denise today," she said, clearing her throat first. I continued to stare out the window and watch the dashed lines on the street blur into one. Her comment didn't mean much to me, but the reason for saying so did. Denise was her best friend; they talked every day, yet it had never warranted turning down the radio before.

"She told me some things about you tonight." About me, I thought. Why would they be talking about me? The solid white line that I had become fixed upon separated into hundreds of single white dashes as I became more focused.

"Why were you talking about me? What did she say?" I stared over at her profile as she drove.

"She didn't really say much. She just told me to talk to you about . . ." She stopped speaking and focused on the car in front of us more intensely than she had been.

"Talk to me about what?" I snapped. The inside of the car filled with my insecurities.

Her hands, previously locked around the wheel at ten and two, slowly slid down to nine and three. "She told me to talk to you about your sexuality."

She didn't look at me, her gaze locked on the taillights we followed. She spoke to the windshield.

Anger pierced the cold that I felt. My numb fingertips dug into the underside of my legs where I sat on them for warmth. My teeth clamped shut and my throat dried. "What are you talking about? My sexuality?" I forced out a slight chuckle. "What do you want to know?" She stared straight ahead. "If you want to know something just come out and say it. What? Do you want to know that I don't know if I'm gay? Or do you want to know that every time you sent me to Granny's house Roy would force me to do things to him? Or do you want to know that I'm really confused all the time about things that you can't even ask me about? Is that what you wanted to talk to me about? Well, I'm not really in the mood to talk right now." The car slowed, approaching the stop sign three blocks from our house. I opened the car door and ran in the opposite direction of home and the car. She didn't follow. I sat in Sheffield Park for hours: anger turned to fear, turned to sadness, turned to relief, turned to solitude, turned to desperation. I slept on a friend's floor that night, and I wore his clothes to school the next day.

When I walked into my room the following afternoon, pamphlets covered my pillow. I scanned the blue-and-yellow one on top. Facts like—by the age of

eighteen one out of seven males has been sexually abused—jumped out at me. The number thirty-eight million shocked me when I saw it attached to the number of adults who had been sexually abused as children. I pushed them all to the floor and kicked them under the bed. I wasn't prepared to deal with it.

That night I lay on my back and watched bits of torn-up pamphlets flutter to my bedroom floor, through the flickering light of *M.A.S.H.* reruns and infomercials.

In school, silence is golden. At home, silence gets you therapy. Therapist #2 went by Dr. Jim. Had he gone by his last name, I may have believed him when he told me that children who were sexually abused will commonly become either over or under sexually active at some point. Though he was better than the 2000-year-old therapist #1, shriveled and Grim-Reaper-like, I just couldn't take Dr. Jim seriously. I became highly irritated at his high-pitched, sing-songy voice constantly reaffirming that my shame, inability to trust, and secrecy all stemmed from my sexual trauma.

As his tone danced through my head in his cramped office, overflowing with potted plants and books, I stared at the painting on the wall behind him. It was a print of a VanGogh painting *Sunflowers*. I let the blues and whites meld into the yellows until it all looked like one mass of colors. I mentally picked off every petal of every sunflower on the canvas. I imagined throwing the vase of flowers at Dr. Jim just to get him to shut up or, at least, speak to me in a normal tone.

"Now we're making some real connections here. How does that make you feel, Ryan?" he sang to me, referencing something I had completely ignored.

"What?" I asked, staring at two squirrels bounding through the swaying limbs of the tree outside the window.

"How does that make you feel, Ryan?" he repeated.

"Well, to tell you the truth, I have no idea what you're talking about. I do know that I hate it when you ask me, 'How does that make you feel, Ryan?' It absolutely drives me *crazy*, and I hate the way your voice goes up and down like that when you say 'How does that make you feel, Ryan?' It's not natural to speak like that . . . and stop ending all of your sentences with my name. It's so annoying. Jesus Christ, I'm loonier now than I was when I walked in. How much longer am I in here?"

He scribbled frantically as I spoke. "OK, Ryan, now we're getting somewhere. I really do think that we're tapping into something here. Tell me how you're feeling about your present situation, Ryan." He never looked up from

his yellow legal pad.

"You're fucking hopeless, Dr. Jim. Fucking hopeless. Now, how does that make you feel?"

I refused to speak the rest of the time. I just stared out at the squirrels in the tree, working tirelessly to achieve some unseen goal, under the glow of a setting April-evening sun.

As I walked down the dingy hallway lit by a single bulb doing the job of four others, which were burnt out and blackened, the smell of moldy carpet overtook me, and I asked myself, *What am I doing here?* At 2C, I stood in front of the door for at least a minute before I knocked, softly at first, positive it couldn't be heard over the sound of the porn seeping out from under the door like dense cigar smoke, irritating and unavoidable regardless of one's own tastes. I knocked louder the second time, with more authority and purpose. Silence. The silence that engulfed the dark hallway and everything behind the door of 2C frightened me. No, I would not be scared anymore. My eyes slightly squinted and my teeth gnashed together, I stood still and waited. He opened the door.

John, 5' 7", white, fortyish, stood in the open doorway in only black bikini briefs. My teeth clamped tight, making my jaws ache from the pressure. Though not entirely different from what I remembered six months before, he now repulsed me even more.

Months earlier I had stood in the aisle of the public library, flipping desperately through a reference book to find some—any—information for my senior English comp paper. Like always, I'd let my high school social life come before my schoolwork. I had only two days left to work on the paper that we'd been given three weeks to write. I frantically searched for material.

"Hey," he said, walking up behind me and startling me in the library silence.

"Yes?" I answered. He stopped right behind me.

"What are you doing?" he asked in a concerned manner.

"Oh. I'm just doing some research to write a paper for school." Not realizing that he didn't work at the library, I thought nothing of his question.

"Here you go, take this." He extended a freckled hand covered in thin red hairs and a slip of paper folded in half. Instinctively I reached out and took it into my own hand. Before I could ask him what it was, he turned and walked back down the aisle toward the staircase. I read his note inquisitively. "Want a blowjob? Call me. John." Those words and his number were messily scrawled in blue ink on a scrap of torn-out spiral-bound paper. "Sick, fucking old man!"



I said in a voice too loud for the library. Not wanting to be seen as the writer, I feared throwing it away there; I stuffed it into my backpack to dispose of later and continued my research. Six months later I actually found that note again, mixed amongst the other random papers, wrappers, and flyers that decorated my bedroom floor.

Calling his number was a test. A teenage boy doesn't have to sleep with a girl to know if he's straight or not. That's not how heterosexuality works. You just know. I'd slept with girls before. OK, one girl before . . . the others were just botched attempts. I didn't have to test that theory. But did I really like guys? Sure, they were attractive enough, but could I sleep with a man? John didn't know it, but he was about to become research on a whole new level. A test. My gay test. So there I stood in his doorway, staring at him and all of his sagging skin, unkempt hair, and out-of-shape physique.

"Come in." The sweeping motion of his arm into his apartment pulled my eyes to the stacks and piles of things within. There were mounds of clothes thrown across the dining-room table. The newspapers piled in the corners were topped with dozens of assorted magazines. The back wall was lined with video boxes. The neatness of the boxes contradicted the haphazard collection of things scattered throughout the two rooms I could see. I still had the option of leaving, yet my legs moved forward, past him and into the apartment. His fingers ran down my back to my ass. I shut my eyes, and every minute hair growing from my skin pricked up and brushed the inner lining of my clothing. My body flashed cold, then hot. "Have a seat on the sofa." The porn which could be heard from outside the door still played but was muted. Two naked men splashed around childishly in a backyard pool. As I sat down on the couch, he stopped the tape with the remote he had picked up from the coffee table in front of me. "Who needs them when I have you?" he asked, kneeling before me.

His small thick, stumpy fingers undid my belt buckle, button, and zipper with expertise. The feel of his clammy palm against my belly and pubic hair made my head swell with pressure. Running his hand under my shirt to squeeze my nipple, he leaned down and took my flaccid penis into his mouth. Smiling at me from between my legs, he pulled at my limp dick with his wet hands. Again he took me into his mouth and began pulling on his own cock.

I pulled my hands from beneath myself and entangled my fingers in his hair, gripping his mane tightly. "Get off of me!" I shouted, pulling his head away from my crotch.

"Mmmmm. A rough one," he replied, grinning a crooked-toothed smile from his craned-back head.

from his craned-back head.

"You sick fucker!" After pushing him backwards onto the coffee table, I stood up and said to myself, *What was I thinking? What the fuck? What am I doing here? What the fuck?* As I ran back down the dimly lit hallway, the sound of porn and devious laughter chased me out into the street.

The drive home was a blur of tollbooths and taillights.

I was eighteen years old, and I couldn't remember how to pray. I hadn't prayed in a long time. Long enough for me not to remember the last time. I didn't even know how to say grace before I ate. I wasn't a Huxtable, a Keaton, or a Brady; I ate dinner in front of the television with my sister, not around a table of "So how was your day, son?" conversation. My sister didn't care if I didn't bless my food before I ate it. My grandmother, on the other hand, would speak to the heavens when I stood in her kitchen picking from the Thanksgiving turkey. "Oh, Lord, the boy has his hands in the food before it's blessed. Heathen. He doesn't know any better." Then she'd turn to me, taking my hands. "Thank you, Lord, for the nourishment of our bodies we are about to receive. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen. Now, you can't be eating the food before it's blessed." I guess I was just uncouth that way, but I didn't care.

But now that I really needed those praying skills; I didn't know what to do. I had a debate whether all of that getting down on my knees business was really necessary, but I did it. I didn't want to risk my chances by being the guy who prayed lying on his back. I started in, head bowed and hands clasped. "Dear Lord. Wait, this isn't a letter; I don't have to say dear. OK, Lord. Is that what you say . . . Lord? Or is it Heavenly Father? Hey, Big Guy. It's me, Ryan. I've been thinking about some stuff. I think it was my granny who told me, 'The Lord will only give you as much as you can handle. Some people can handle more than others.' Now I had handled not only Roy but Earl, too. I know that I'm not supposed to question your will, but I think that's enough. I can't handle any more. I've been strong up until now, but I don't think I can do the bisexual thing. How come it has to be so hard for me all the time? Can't I just be normal? I'm sure this is another lesson I'm supposed to learn, but whatever it is, I don't get it. I'm not handling this very well. Can you do something about it? Thanks. Amen."

I prayed for seven straight nights. Maybe I wasn't doing it right.

Kara told me that she hadn't been with anyone for a while, but she didn't tell me why. I just assumed that she didn't want to portray the slutty-college-

girl image, and that was pretty admirable. She finally showed me why she hadn't slept with anyone in the past two years.

We had only been dating for three months, and things were great between us. We weren't having sex, but we found other ways to show each other affection. I was content with the way things were going so far.

"Hey, Ry. What time are you coming over?" Kara asked, when she called me between classes.

"I'm going to Dill Street after class to have a few drinks with Jul and Neel, but I was going to come over right from there. Why?"

"Well, try to come over early because I'm making dinner, and I have something special for you."

"Ohh . . . special. What is it?"

"That's for later." She giggled.

"That's cool. I wasn't planning on having too many, anyway. I'll see you later."

The craziness of my college day: running from one class to the next, trying to finish work that was assigned weeks before, sprinting to a conference that I was already ten minutes late for clogged my brain, and my mind was on beer and nothing else. I hadn't noticed how late it had gotten until my stomach growled with hunger pains.

"Fuck! I told Kara that I would be over early tonight." I slammed the rest of the beer I had in front of me.

"I'm sure she's left thirteen messages by now," Neel said. My roommates always found pleasure in a group session of Kara bashing. That's exactly what they were doing as I walked out of the bar, flipping them all off as the glass door closed behind me. I walked the two blocks from Dill Street to Kara's basement apartment.

"Shit. Shit. Shit," I whispered to myself before attempting to walk in, the way I always had, but the door was locked. "Fuck." I knocked on the cheap, hollow door.

She stared blankly at me when she opened the door. I started in on the apologies. "Kara, I'm so sorry. I lost track of time." She didn't even speak, merely turned and headed toward the back of the apartment and walked into her bedroom. I closed the front door and followed.

"Kara?" I called from the kitchen as I passed through it. "Did you eat?" She didn't answer. I walked to the bedroom and stood in the doorway. Kara lay face down on the bed, her bare feet hanging off. I lay down beside her and wrapped one arm around her. "Hey, I'm sorry." She lifted her head and turned to look at me, her gray eyes red and puffy. "Babe, what's wrong?" Gently she placed her



thin lips to mine and kissed me deeply, then rolled me onto my back and straddled my hips, hovering over me. She placed soft kisses on my forehead, eyes, nose, and lips. I continued to question her about what was bothering her. The more I asked, the more she kissed me, silencing the questions. I understood and stopped asking, knowing if it was important enough she would tell me.

Her touch was passionate, her body was hot, but she seemed distant. I caressed her flesh with feather touches.

"I can't explain what I feel for you, Ryan, but it scares me." Her voice was a whisper.

"You don't have to explain anything."

"I want you." She stared into my eyes and said it again.

I hadn't grasped what she meant until she reached under the pillow and pulled a condom out. "Are you sure?" I asked. She didn't speak. She unrolled the condom onto me and lowered herself until I was deep inside of her. Her legs quivered as she slowly rocked her hips back and forth. She leaned down and kissed me again. It was then that I noticed the tears welling in her eyes. "Kara, are you OK? Tell me what's wrong." I held her face in my hands.

The tears fell and she sobbed as she spoke. "Remember me telling you about Nate, my ex-boyfriend?" I nodded my head in affirmation. "Well . . . the reason why we broke up was because he . . . I don't know . . . he got a little rough with me one night."

"He hit you?" I asked, confused.

"Well . . . yeah, but there was more . . . he raped me." Her body fell heavily upon mine and shook violently as the soulful cry poured from her and filled the tiny basement-apartment bedroom.

I held her tight, and connected with her on more levels than she could know. I squeezed her close to me, unable to speak, and listened to her sighs fade to rhythmic breathing. In the silence she slid me back inside of her and stared into my eyes.

"Kara . . . no."

"Ryan, I need to."

As our bodies rocked as one, her tears spashed onto my chest and washed away the covers of my own childhood. I stared at the plastic glowing stars on the ceiling in the glow of the Hello Kitty nightlight and knew that as she healed her wounds she opened those that I had merely bandaged.

Once Kara and I got serious about each other, we never spent a night alone . . . except for that one Thursday night. She was doing her student teaching at

the time, and I was in my last semester of academic classes. My days were exactly the same.

I would finish my classes and meet my roommates at Dill Street for a few drinks. The dimly lit bar was kept that way for a reason. The paint peeling from the walls, the mismatched tables and chairs, and the cracked floor tiles were all harder to see in the dark. The 3:00 P.M. sun filtered in through the tinted windows and magnified the flaws with natural light. The beer was always flat and the food was always cold, but we didn't go for the atmosphere. We went out of sheer necessity. There was nowhere else on campus that a cheeseburger and fries with a Bud Light draft could be purchased for the unbeatable price of two dollars. Going to Dill Street, conveniently named for its location, was easier than cooking and livelier than our living room.

After a late lunch and a round or two . . . ten, depending on the day (Tuesdays and Thursdays it was completely acceptable to stay through dinner), we'd head back to the house. By this time the answering machine would be exploding with messages from one of the five mothers who constantly called, nagging boyfriends and girlfriends needing our whereabouts, and classmates trying to locate one of us for the study group we'd missed hours before; the dog would be waiting impatiently by the door, doing his let-me-out-to-pee dance; and we'd all walk in, careful to avoid anything that resembled responsibility or activities that required effort, and headed either to a bathroom or bedroom. Me, being one of the two males in the household, not including the dog, had a bladder stronger than my female housemates. I usually made straight for my bed. In one swift motion, I would be shed of my coat and backpack and falling onto my back toward the bed. Motivation was hard to come by at 909 Neely. I'd stare up at the ceiling and follow the tributaries of cracks that had been poorly repaired by our slumlord, Jim Arnold. I would hardly move when Julie yelled up the stairs, "Hey, asshole, Kara called like twelve times. Doesn't she know your schedule by now?"

Ignoring the harassment of my roommates about Kara was always the best option but one that I rarely chose. "Fuck off, bitch," I answered. There were never twelve messages from Kara. There was probably only one time that she left more than two, but that didn't matter to my scornful roommates. They found fault with anyone that I brought home. Kara's phone habits, coupled with her voice, hair, and perky nature, tipped the scales of flaws in their eyes.

Living with four other college seniors, the phone was rarely accessible. I wouldn't call Kara back. She usually didn't want anything important anyway. I'd just go over to her apartment. I didn't knock when I got there; the door was

always unlocked when she was home, so I'd just walk in.

It was even later than normal this Thursday night. When I walked in Kara was already wearing her purple pajama bottoms with stars and moons on them and a pink Power Ranger T-shirt surely meant for a child half her age. I wasn't completely drunk, but I wasn't sober. I merely wanted to sleep. That night coming to her house wasn't a source of entertainment; I was just trading my empty twin bed for her queen size and a little company. I went through the everyday, "Hey, how was school?" and "Hey, how were the kids today?" routine before I lay down on her bed and pretended to be listening. I scarcely remember falling asleep. The slight shaking of the bed and a gentle goodnight kiss woke me for a moment but failed to rouse me fully from the beer-buzzed slumber I'd fallen into.

Hours passed, and the usual tossing and thrashing about during the night had separated Kara and me. I lay on my side, knees pulled up, my back to Kara and the wall. Half sleeping, she slid closer, pressed the warmth of her body to mine, and draped an arm over my bare chest. Flashes of sleepless childhood nights, unwanted hands touching private areas, and weakness overtook me. My eyes spread wide to find darkness before me save for the dim glow of her Hello Kitty nightlight across the room. Kicking free of the blankets and swinging wildly, I found myself pressed tightly into the far corner of the room, terrified by memories of years past. Kara lay frightened, alone in her bed, while I stared back at her, afraid, ashamed, and embarrassed.

Consumed by the past that I so desperately tried to leave behind, I didn't even get dressed before I got into my car and drove back home. That Thursday night was the first and only night we slept under the same Muncie, Indiana, sky, in separate beds, all of our unseen fears revealed by the light of a silver moon.

Dr. Ray always wears red socks. He's therapist #3. I don't know why he wears them; I've never asked. I treat his socks the same way I would treat a large birthmark on someone's face; we both know it's there, but you just don't talk about it. Maybe his socks have some calming effect on his patients, like the white walls in a sanitarium. I spend most of my session staring down at his socks, so they must be doing something.

He's definitely not like therapist #1 or #2. I schedule my appointments for after work, so it's usually rounding 8:00 P.M. By the time I walk in, he's already taken off the tie, and the top button of his shirt is undone. I had an appointment during the day once, and he was a totally different person, formal, almost distant. I felt like an appointment more than a patient.



The sessions usually last about an hour. Close to twenty minutes of that is spent talking about him. I know more about *his* kids, *his* childhood, and *his* college years than I ever thought my weekly fee could get me. I'm OK with listening to him associate my life with his. It makes my sessions feel personal.

I figured out therapists #1 and #2 fairly quickly. I told them what they wanted to hear. I gave them breakthroughs when I thought they needed one. I cried when I felt they had probed enough. I got angry right on cue. I really tried to make them feel that all of their hard work and degrees were finally paying off; they were affecting lives and helping a lost soul find his way to the light. Dr. Ray is tough to crack, though. He doesn't seem to need breakthroughs, or tears, or fits of rage. He's content with talking about himself. He gets me with his shrink tricks, though. He'll be leaned back in his rolling chair, fingers laced behind his head, khaki pant leg pulled high on the leg that was crossed over the other, his red socks blazing bright, talking about his wife or something, and I'll burst into tears, flooded with some distant memory that he sparked. I leave every week thinking, *That son-of-a-bitch did it again*. He's doing something right, red socks and all; I'm still going every week. Our year anniversary is coming up soon. Maybe I'll get him a new pair of red socks.

I've been teaching for four years now, and I can say with all honesty, parent/teacher conferences aren't fun for anyone involved. The student fears he'll be exposed for the hell-spawned demon that he portrays for eight hours a day. The parent sits silently hoping that the faculty isn't wishing sterility on her because her offspring isn't the best reflection of the proper home training she so desperately tried to instill. The teacher goes through the routine of strengths, weaknesses, behavior, and plans for improvement, all while mentally preparing a "things to do" list and hoping the parent doesn't get long-winded in her explanation of why the student does this and doesn't do that. There are three types of meetings: ones that end in anger, ones that end in laughter, and ones that end in tears. The occasional combo meeting occurs, but, for the most part, the standard reactions hold true.

The meeting with Carlos and Jorge's mom is one that would defy all parent/teacher conference rules forever. Mrs. Torres was well aware that her boys were no angels. She entered the room, lips pursed and face emotionless from countless meetings that had been the same, year after year. She knew what would be said before she walked in and knew what to expect after she walked out. Her boys may not have been model students, but they were consistent.

Every student starts off unblemished on the first day of school. Both Jorge

and Carlos soiled their reputations before that day ended. “These boys need to be separated. I can’t have the dynamic duo destroying my classroom every day.” This sentiment was shared by each of the core subject teachers.

Mom walked in and sat down sideways at the round table without removing her coat. She perched an infant Torres on her knee and began bouncing. She scanned the faces of the five battered teachers sitting before her, knowing that each would have killed her boys if given the right opportunity. As if controlled by a single brain, they flopped down in unison, simultaneously slouched down in their chairs, and leaned to the side furthest away from Mom. Jorge sat on her left and Carlos on her right.

The beginning of the meeting went like any other. The strengths were miniscule, the weaknesses were heavy-handed, and the behavior comments from each teacher were long and painful. Jorge and Carlos grinned devilishly as each teacher bombarded Mrs. Torres with her sons’ daily acts of defiance, destruction, and deviance.

She boiled with anger. Shaking a hooked, overworked, underpaid finger at each of them. She abolished Christmas, birthdays, weekends, and even Easter, but it was already in ink on each of their “permanent records” that she was all talk and no action. The teachers were prepared for her canned rant and promises of changes. I hadn’t snapped back from the grocery list I was preparing in my head until her story broke script and she started in on the explicit details of her boys’ sexual abuse.

I stared down at the table and held back tears as she explained how each boy from the age of five to ten was continuously sodomized and forced to perform oral sex on an adult uncle, while the other boy watched until it was his turn. Her voice cracked and failed at times. Her bouncing knee, previously moving for the baby’s sake, could not be stopped now. Her hands shook as she smoothed each of the boys jet black hair down, once again seeing them as the innocent *hijos* she had given birth to and loved with all her power. The hardened boys melted into their seats, softened by their own tears, and neither had the strength to look up. It’s rare that a family member will sexually abuse more than one child at a time. It is most common that one will be victimized up to an arbitrary age, then in succession the next child will follow. The Torres boys, being twins, not only became dual victims, but each played a part in the other’s abuse. Their resistance to authority and constant need for attention and affirmation were explained through their tears.

I couldn’t help but look at them differently after that meeting. The unseen bond between the Torres boys and myself was one that I would always keep

silent, yet hold dear. There was a reason the Torres boys crossed my path. I'll never know if I helped them, but I do know that they helped me. Years of unanswered questions of "Why me?" became instantly clear every time they walked into my classroom. Now I don't ask, "Why me?" I ask, "Why them?"



# Metro

Christine M. Semenow

RUSSIA. I'VE SEEN IT ON THE NEWS. RUSSIA HAS A RED SQUARE AND A BLACK Sea. All the buildings look like fancy ornaments. It is the land of beluga caviar, although no one in Russia can afford to eat it. Russians like vodka. The men look like railroad workers, with thick eyebrows like Brezhnev. Most of them have birthmarks. Zachar, my father, had a birthmark on his forehead, just like Gorbachev. It's part of being a Russian man. So is squatting while dancing with arms folded. I've never seen my father dance like that, but I know Russians do. Russian women? They have thick eyebrows too, and they all wear wool scarves around their heads.

In summer, Russia's countryside looks like a scene from *Fiddler on the Roof*. The wind blows dust across desolate fields, and crooked peasant women pick the soil for a few shriveled potatoes. Or beets. Russia is filled with beets. My grandmother, Marfa Nikolina Semenow, was like this. I never met her, but I know she was poor—a starving peasant who lived on a small patch of land with her seven children. Zachar was the youngest, the baby. Like me. Russian men pull plows through the dirt with their backs. If there are no men, the women pull the plows. There is no fresh drinking water. No indoor plumbing. Everyone is dirty and worn, covered in scarves and rags.

Russia in winter is *Doctor Zhivago*. Everyone wears fur hats and coats while they stand in the bread lines or collect pieces of wood for their fires. The people have creases in their faces from their hard luck. No one smiles in Russia, it hurts too much. Their frozen faces will crack. Russia is a place where people freeze and starve and die.

I know all about the history, too. I've read stories about Anastasia and Rasputin, the bourgeois and the Bolsheviks. Russians are always revolting against something. It's hard to live there. Make a mistake, and people get shipped off to Siberia. But I decided to visit the Motherland to see it for myself.

I knew that when I set foot on Russian soil, good karma would surround me and I would find the one Semenow, out of the thousands in the Russian phone book, with an uncle or cousin named Zachar who died in the war. At this point I would tell them that he, in fact, had not died in the war but lived in exile in America, and I am living proof of this. Then, over borsch and boiled eggs, we would all cry and hug and the life blood of Russia would begin to flow through my veins and I could not only decipher the Cyrillic alphabet but start speaking Russian with the best of them. So convinced was I that this would happen that I not only left my *Learn Russian in 10 Minutes a Day* books unopened but placed them strategically on the dining-room table as a constant reminder of my upcoming epiphany. My father could heave a sigh in his grave knowing that his little Marfa had reconnected the family. "It's OK, Pa. It's all OK now . . . I've found them."

I didn't know that Russia doesn't have phone books. And I was soon to find out that one cannot predict karma. I certainly didn't know that Moscow is at the same latitude as Alaska, and the White Nights stretch the daylight hours so that the sky never really gets dark. I didn't know that Moscow in July is hot. Dripping sweat hot. I didn't know that our little rooms in a concrete high-rise turned into our private little death chambers. Roach-infested rooms with child-sized cots and windows that opened just barely enough for your head. I spent those long white nights killing cockroaches and standing with my head squeezed out of the window, smoking. Smoking was not allowed in our rooms, but I'm sure Zoia, the cleaning woman knew. But Zoia, with her painted lips and her one gold tooth that matched her huge earrings, liked me. She did my laundry once and didn't even charge me. I knew she wouldn't tell the ladies in the office about my smoking. The fact that I gave her an American dollar bill and a cheese spreader, complete with decorative American-flag handle, probably didn't hurt, either. They all seemed to like me after that. One of them, a sturdy blond with heavy legs, gave me a little glass dog and a box of chocolates.

Maybe they could see what I could not. That I was a peasant and I came from a long line of washerwomen just like them.

When I went out and bought a fan for my room, I became the wealthy American student. Russians don't believe in air conditioning or window screens. Or hot water, for that matter. Take a bath, cool off, there is all the ice-cold water you want. The mosquitoes and the heat don't faze those hearty Russians. They are used to suffering; I think they like it. Not me, the soft American. I realize now that my father fled Russia not because of the war, but for the sole reason that I could press the "High Cool" button whenever I wanted to. Thanks, Pa.

Moscow in summer is a man's fantasy land, thousands of the tightest tits and asses draped in the most overtly alluring clothes, teetering conveniently within arm's reach. Moscow women are not subtle. They are not dressed in torn rags. They are all named Oxana, exotic long-legged beauties with blue-green-gray eyes and full lips. They are not like me, past my prime and flabby. This depresses me greatly, and after a week of sight-seeing with my three fellow students, twenty-something males with compasses in their pants, I was getting squirrely. I had no choice but to heed Deanna's advice and venture out to find a meeting. Deanna is my sponsor, and before I left for Moscow, all she said was, "Don't drink, don't get laid, find a meeting, and stay out of trouble." Yeah, yeah, yeah. Sometimes I think Deanna worries too much. I had no intention of drinking or getting laid. Of course, I had no intention of going to an AA meeting, either. But here I was with the map that Deanna gave me, heading to Pushkin Square, into the heart of Moscow to look for a small Catholic church off a street called Tverskaya, where at 7:30 on Tuesday nights, I would find sober English speakers. It's a funny thing, intention. Intention is the seed from which all else grows, but ultimately, your choice has the final say. The choice you make can and will alter your karmic path. Don't ask me too much about this right now, it's really very metaphysical and has to do with physics and the laws of energy and light. Suffice it to say I was in Moscow, heading to a meeting on a Tuesday night in July.

The Metro, at the center of the earth, is cooler, insulated with white marble and steel. The stations are decorated with fancy chandeliers and statues, mosaics and masterful ironwork. All this is done to help ease the claustrophobia of being so far underground with gushing hordes of people. I was off to Pushkin Square, the central meeting place in Moscow, an oasis in the heart of the city. Pushkin's great statue greets hundreds of beautiful people—handsome, tailored men with



bouquets of fresh flowers greet attractive, provocative women as they prance around the fountains, the evening cooling them through their sheer fabrics. Pushkin, the founder of Russian literature, would be pleased to see so many loyal compatriots flock to his side.

Once my foot was inside the train car, I left the gleaming white marble opulence of the station. The train car, lit with weak yellow bulbs, looked dirty and dull. Long, brown leather benches ran along the length of the train, and the windows overhead were lowered from the top, letting in noise, not air. But every once in a while when the doors slid open, along with the warm bodies forcing their way on, a gust of air managed to raise the hem of a delicate sundress. I found a seat on the bench. A tall man with brown hair squeezed next to me into the few inches of space left on the bench. Rude, I thought. Russians are so rude. Luckily, Pushkin Square was just five stops from our little town, Oktoberskaya. My eyes scanned the line of shoes across the aisle, toe cleavage in high heels. As my eyes drifted to the windows above their heads, I stopped to admire the mounds of breasts, young and old alike, all with gold crosses vibrating on their soft flesh. I made a mental note to buy a gold cross and punch up the cleavage. As the train moved, my eyes drifted back and forth from feet to breasts and breasts to feet, dizzy, stirring, liberated. I focused my eyes on the window, repeating to myself that in Russian, a P looks like an N, P equals N, Pushkin Square begins with the letter N. And, I needed to find a meeting and expose my breasts.

The man had molded himself into my body and, as the train jerked back and forth, he became intimate with my curves. I could feel him melting into my sides. Then he spoke. The bench of breasts across the aisle looked at him, looked at me, looked at him, and stopped at me, and a bead of sweat trickled down my temple. I felt shame. I thought about my books sitting on the dining-room table. I heard Leonid asking . . . *"You speak Russian? Then you no Russian . . ."* No, I'm not Russian, Leonid . . . I'm American, can't you tell by my breasts? I'd lost my count for the stops, was it two or three?? . . . For some instinctual reason I put my wrist near this man's face so that he could read my watch. To my surprise, it worked. For a minute. Then, he spoke again. I turned and looked at him, our faces inches apart. Clear brown eyes and red cheeks. He smiled. I liked him because he was a man in this sea of overexposed women. How nice to have a Russian man talking to me on the Metro. But now I must answer. I don't want to speak because I know the breasts will judge me. *Stupid American. Who does she think she is? Coming to Moscow and can't even speak our language. And look at the way she is dressed. That long skirt and clunky shoes.* But the brown-eyed

Russian man was looking and smiling.

"I'm sorry, I don't speak Russian," I say.

"Eenglish . . . you speak Eeenglish," he says, grinning still. And now the breasts sprout eyes that widen and narrow and I let out a sigh. Stop 3 or 4? He tells me his name is Seva and that he is a computer programmer and that he's studying English and he is very happy to practice speaking English with me. I notice his long muscular thighs and solid hands and how his warm body fits rather nicely with mine, and how nice it would be to sweat with someone else in my little room in Oktoberskaya. "*Don't drink and don't get laid.*" Deanna, you just don't understand—I'm supposed to do this. It's a God thing. And a God thing overrules karma—and intention—and choice. Plus, it's a Russian God thing. Who am I to question it? Just look at all those gold crosses wedged between those luscious breasts. It's a sign, for sure.

I tell Seva that I am a student and that my father was Russian and now I'm chatting him up and the consecrated breasts seem much less threatening.

"Do you have a car?" I ask. He nods yes. Oh, bliss. A car. A man. A Russian man with a car. The jostled breasts have no clue what I'm saying; I watch their crosses vibrate and dance in the sweat of their cleavage. The train stops and an N appears. N equals P. Pushkin Square. My stop. I get up. Seva gets up. "May I walk with you?" he asks. I nod. I have been touched by the Russian Orthodox God, that mystical wizard of creation. He baptized me, he knows I'm here.

A horde of people push to get on the train. Seva lunges ahead and I follow hesitantly. I can see the top of his head, his red shirt. I have to sidestep around people, around old women who won't let me pass. All the women are creased and crooked like trees. Where are all those lovely breasts and rosy cheeks? And the men? All the men are dead. Like my father. They have been carried away on the train. Hurry. Escape. Panic. I think about Zachar. How many trains were you thrown on? How many times were you lost, Pa? How many times were you rendered mute in a strange land? Is this the legacy you've left me? The train pulls away behind me as I move forward with the crowd. A trail of ants in the underground tunnel. And Seva? I have lost sight of the red shirt and the rosy cheeks, my Russian man with the car. We move up a wide marble staircase and turn into a narrow concrete tunnel. It's narrower, tighter and darker. Old women in shawls sell newspapers and wild flowers from their gardens. Grandma Marfa looks at me with a disapproving eye. Babushka Marfa, it's me, your granddaughter. I bet you didn't know you had a granddaughter, and an American one at that, but I am your namesake. I've come here to tell you about your son, Zachar. He didn't die in the war. He got out. He survived. Aren't you

glad? Don't you understand, he couldn't contact you. I look like him, don't I? Why can't you recognize me? It must have been hard, losing your baby. But you can tell me; that's why I came. I've been searching for you, searching the cemeteries, and instead, I've found you here in the Metro. It is me. Christine Marfa Semenow! My own babushka betrays me. Look at me, you old witch! It's not my fault I never learned Russian. It's not my fault I didn't find you earlier. Why won't you accept me now? I've come all this way . . . Babushka Marfa, please . . . *pajalsta*. I buy a bunch of flowers, delicate red and white ones. "We had these in our garden," I tell her, but she doesn't even smile. "Zachar, your son, Zachar—" I say, but Babushka Marfa moved away from me, her knotted hands filled with little bouquets. I stand there, feeling faint, the back of my hair wet with sweat. Fresh air, I think, I need to get the hell out of here.

Up ahead, the tunnel splits. I see a sign with words in red, orange, blue, and yellow like the lines on my map, but nothing starts with a P or an N and I have to pick a side, but which side? Just keep going, I tell myself. While there are many exits to the street, I know from the map that the underground is massive and it links like a wheel and I am playing roulette, Russian roulette. I stop. I have to go back. I press my feet firmly into the ground as the bodies clip my shoulders. I inch my way to the wall, wondering why everyone is going the other way. All those women. Herds of them. Frantic. Some carry small dogs. Baskets of strawberries. Seva? Where did you go, Seva? How could you let me go? Didn't you know that we were going to spend long days making love along the dirty Moscow River? Pa . . . where are you, Pa? You're supposed to link the language into my brain. You are supposed to help me with this. But I've inherited nothing from you. No tongue, no Babushka, no memory. Nothing. You left me to crawl underground alone. Is that what you wanted? Did you want me to understand how alone you were? Well, now I do.

I fight my way back to the marble staircase, back to the station that begins with an N, the Pushkin Square stop. I see the escalator to the street, to the square, to the English-speaking expatriates waiting for me in the back room. Two guards in drab brown suits with red sashes stand at the base of the exit. Their cheeks rosy, like Seva's. I walk toward them seeking help, but feel something very different. I pull out my pocket dictionary, looking for the word street, and notice that I had lost my flowers. God, it all seemed so simple in my mind. Zachar, I trusted you, I thought you wanted me here. The guards shake their heads as I approach, as if I haven't noticed the hordes of people behind them coming DOWN the UP escalator. This is wrong. This is all wrong. I get close, but not too close. They are young and are armed. Gdych Street? I say,



*pajalsta*, where is the street? They look at each other and laugh. One points toward the marble staircase, the one that leads to the concrete tunnel. His eyes are brown like his uniform. A bead of sweat and a tear mix on my cheek, *pajalsta*, please, *pajalsta*, not the tunnel.

Does she drink? Does she get laid? Does she find her long lost relatives during the course of her five-week stay in Moscow? No. No. And no. I did manage to find my way out of the Metro. And that was an accomplishment in itself. I did find the English-speaking meeting and once seated, I began to cry. I told them that I was afraid and homesick. The friendly expatriates gave me some phone numbers. We talked. We met for lunch. I realized that regardless of my father's past, I am, first and foremost, an American. Even if I have my father's nose and my grandmother's name. So, what did I learn on my journey on the Metro? The next time you see me, let your eyes follow my plunging neckline . . . and notice the gold cross . . . it's from Russia, with love.

# Everybody Needs to Eat

Nicki Brouillette

BEING A WAITRESS IS A LOT LIKE BEING A *STREETWISE* VENDOR. YOU WILL HAVE customers who refuse to look you in the eye, people who seem like they want to spit at you, and those people who will toss you a quarter just to clear their conscience. What separates a good server (or *Streetwise* vendor) from the bad is how they deal with the more irritable kind of patron. Just as no one wants the dirty *Streetwise* man to accompany them down the dark sidewalk singing show tunes in their broke-ass ear, no one wants you, the broke-ass server, divulging your life story and financial woes while their soup loses its steam in the hope that this pathetic display will increase your tip.

The key to making good money is simple: smile, nod, pour the coffee, apologize for everything, and speak in a voice one octave higher, one whole octave sweeter than your own.

Let's say that a stingy old couple has been seated in your section. Let's call this our worst-case scenario. You may think that teenagers are the worst to serve because they are loud, rowdy, generally poor, and prone to experiments involving a water glass, some cigarette ashes, ketchup, and any other condiment within reach. However, as you will soon find, the elderly demand precision.

Approach the booth. It will most certainly be a booth, as the old detest tables, and it will also be in the farthest possible area both from the door, to avoid that windy draft, and from the kitchen, to avoid hearing all that clanging and shouting cooks do. Place in your hand, not directly but atop a napkin, two additional untouched sets of silverware, as there will surely be revolting hot-water stains on the utensils which were previously placed so carelessly on the table. Set the silverware neatly down and say, "Hello, my name is Betty (for they will already like you more since this was a popular name in their era), would either of you care for something to drink?" Do not sound overly peppy. No one wants a cheerleader serving their food. You will know that you said it correctly if the groggy, loose-skinned, liver-spotted old man looks at you and says, "I'll take a whiskey, darlin'," with a phlegm-filled chuckle.

Return with the real drink order: two glasses of water, no ice so they can gulp those keep-alive pills down, a hot tea, and a coffee all balanced on a tray. Make sure that you have placed both hot beverages in the microwave until you heard the sizzle of bubbles erupting, because old people seem to lose their heat sensitivity and therefore believe that everyone, you in particular, is conspiring against them to make everything cold. Make sure you have brought the non-dairy creamer. Set the beverage in front of the appropriate customer. If you hand the woman coffee when she ordered tea, she will heave a sigh and roll her eyes at your inexcusable flightiness, and you will have already lost your tip.

Have a pen ready and poised attentively above your notepad. Know that this is the most essential part of your duty. Keep in mind that the elderly are cursed with numerous allergies and ailments, and if you serve salted meat when they have high blood pressure or cholesterol, **THEY WILL MOST LIKELY DIE RIGHT THERE IN YOUR BOOTH!** Or at least, that is what they want you to believe. It won't happen, ever, but try to remain sensitive nonetheless.

Say, "May I take your order now?" and be old-fashioned about it. Look at the woman, right at her round, thick glasses that cover half her face and magnify her eyes to monster size, when you say it. Scribble your notes and ask lots of questions: How do you want that cooked, what kind of toast, turkey bacon or regular bacon; even, what kind of garnish do you prefer? This will save you trouble later. See, old people are only waiting to die. They have all the time in the world, they do not mind sending food back and they will check for spit. If they have any specifications that are not of a visible variety, for instance, "My food absolutely cannot be cooked in olive oil," pay no attention. They won't



know, and, like I already said, they aren't really going to die. But make sure you pretend to write this down.

It is best to wait for your food directly under the heat lamps. Follow the lead of the elderly. Stare at the cook. Demand he go faster. This is vital, because the heat issue once again comes into play and they will send cold food back. If you take this time to smoke a cigarette in the back, you are doing so at your own risk. Grab the plates out of the window before they have even a chance to touch the stainless-steel counter. Position your fingers at the very edge of the plate so you do not contaminate the food with your filthiness.

Bring the plates to the table, set them down, and say, "Can I get you anything else right now?" Be aware that this answer is an automatic yes: extra napkins, Tabasco sauce, more coffee, more hot water. Be aware, also, that their memories are fading and they will not request all these things at once, so be prepared to trot happily back and forth a minimum of three times. Make sure you are at least a distance of ten feet away from the table before muttering, "Stupid old fucking bastards," under your breath. Those hearing aids are miraculous nowadays. Now you may smoke. You need to.

You must remember to refill coffee and clear the plates because nothing irritates old people more than being forced to keep company with their dirty dishes. Ask if they would like dessert. In this event, refer to the order-taking section above, because it is, again, important to ask questions. For instance, some will want the hot fudge *on the side* of the ice cream in a separate dish so as to not allow the coolness of the ice cream to detract from the heat of the fudge. Please note that people ordering desert will require coffee.

If you have checked on your old people following dessert and they still are not leaving, and it seems they really are going to wait and die right there in your booth, I suggest going out and smoking at least two cigarettes. Maybe talk about politics with a co-worker or discuss sex; everyone in the restaurant business is willing to embellish their sex life for your entertainment. Peer at the booth. When they are gone, approach the table slowly, holding your breath and keeping your eyes closed. Make sure to tell all other servers that this is your ritual so as to avoid collision. Once at the table, peek if you have to, open your eyes. Do you see two shiny quarters? Do not cry. Hold your arms up in the shape of a V and shout, "Yes!" This is your reward. This is all you can hope for. The next time an elderly couple comes creeping into your restaurant, you will know it is best to pawn this table off on someone else.

The restaurant was always slow during the week. I blamed the corporation that designed it. Sure it was just some hamburger joint, but it was not the warm, homey atmosphere that you want when you're eating. The walls were this white, bumpy, easy-to-clean plastic that reflected light from the chrome fixtures hanging above the tables and bounced the sunshine that came in from the large, robbery-deterrent windows lining the building directly into your eyes. The floor was like bathroom tile: tiny white ceramic squares set in dirt-filled grout. The booths were made from the kind of plastic that made your ass sore after a ten-minute sit. Red neon signs hung on the walls, flickering on and off: *Try a Shake, Ask for Cheese*, and probably made people feel like they were in some kind of seedy pornographic diner. There weren't any pastel-colored paintings of seashores and sailboats like they have in family-owned places. There were only these larger-than-life-sized framed photographs of strawberry shakes. The worst part about it was that out of the three-hundred and fifty-seven Steak 'n Shake locations, not one was allowed to play music, which was weird since it seemed like they were going for this whole 1950s motif with the chrome and the checkered tables. A jukebox would've been appropriate.

During the slow periods, Monday through Friday afternoon, we amused ourselves by trying to remember the words to eighties New Wave songs, playing tic-tac-toe on the back of place mats, or sometimes we'd just sit drinking coffee with our boyfriends in the two-seater booths that lined the wall of what we jokingly called the visiting significant-other section. We'd sit, talking and smoking cigarettes: me, Camel Lights; Leah, Newport 100s; Jackie, Virginia Slims. The potency of your cigarette brand was in direct relation to the current state of your life.

Debbie smoked Marlboro Reds. The rest of us never bothered looking out the windows, watching the cars speeding down Route 41, never bothered hoping to see a turn signal flashing in the direction of our lot. We all knew Debbie would get the table even if she had to fight us physically for it.

She was the only one of us servers who was neither in nor had recently dropped out of the nearby community college. Debbie claimed to be thirty, but I swear she looked closer to seventy, and if she hadn't talked about sex so much, I'd be positive she was lying. She had deep-set lines around her eyes for every man who'd ever left her (which I can tell you was a lot), a permanent crease between her eyebrows from giving birth at fourteen, two lines coming down from the corners of her mouth from when her son got drunk and smashed his car into a tree. She had countless wrinkles running down her neck from all the

hours spent in courtrooms and hospitals. Her hands were pruned from serving drinks and chopping lemons and arranging garnish.

After hours without business, when a car or, more often, a pickup truck, finally pulled into our parking lot, Debbie's black-outlined eyes would perk up. She'd tear the first few sheets from her Steak 'n Shake-logo notepad and toss them onto her Marlboro-marked two-seater. The papers were always filled with numbers, usually just addition and subtraction, and they were usually littered with mistakes. Because the amounts under the line were always negative, I figured she was calculating her bills.

She'd rush to the waitress station and grab a few sets of napkin-rolled silverware. The rest of us would just watch. We made our money on weekends. Even if the table was a party of twelve, Debbie'd never ask for help. Maybe she thought we'd try to force her to share the tip, or maybe she just didn't need help. Debbie could carry at least six plates at once, two lined up on her left forearm, one in her left hand, two on top of all those and one in her other hand. She looked like a circus act at five foot two, all adorned in the garb of food. She'd never drop anything as she wobbled across the greasy floor, balance being one of those skills you acquire after a few decades of waiting tables. The other being the ability not to feel. Resting hot plates against your skin deadens your nerve endings, and Debbie had none.

I'd fix the mistakes in her math while she ran back and forth with extra napkins, pots of coffee, barbecue sauce, cream, and, finally, the check.

At quitting time, Leah, Jackie, and I would pull maybe five dollars apiece out of our checkered aprons. Debbie would straighten her pile of cash on the stainless steel counter, never leaving with less than fifty. It never bothered me though, because I knew that in practical terms, Debbie was going home with negative sixteen grand. At least I was up five.

I could never understand how Kelly did it. She was my age, eighteen, and she ran the restaurant, made the dean's list at her college, and maintained a social life. Sure, she was crabby some days, *don't come near me* kind of crabby, but most of the time she was energetic, out in the dining room talking to customers, bussing our tables, getting drinks. I didn't know how she could ever find time to relax.

I could never understand how Kelly did it until I started working midnights. I had just broken up with Craig and even though he was an ass, I didn't know what to do with daylight. Third shifts were always me, Kelly, Chuck the cook, and Rob, another server.



Chuck was my age and white, but he pimped around talking jive like he was Tupac, always wearing this blue visor upside down and tilted to the right. Even though we hadn't really talked much, the extent of our conversations mostly being, "S'up?" followed by some sort of smirk or nod; I felt like he was my big brother. Whenever Craig used to come in, Chuck would stand there wiping the counter watching the two of us talk or argue or whatever with this real hard *I could fuck him up for you* look on his face. As soon as I'd leave Craig's table, he'd walk up to me, pat my shoulder, and ask if I wanted to go in the back. The two of us would sit in the break room smoking cigarettes in silence.

Rob was this six-foot-seven blond guy with a floppy bowl haircut. He once confessed to me that he had a dream in which it was revealed to him that he was a demon, perhaps even *the* demon. So that was Rob.

One night, the four of us were all crammed into a booth sifting through newspapers that had been left behind. I kept searching the help-wanted section—well we all did—but there really wasn't much else out there. It was February and the bridge down the street was under construction, so we weren't expecting any business. Kelly and Chuck were ignoring each other, as people who have sex occasionally and work together often do.

Chuck tapped my shoulder, cocked his head and asked, "Wanna smoke a blunt?"

At that Kelly suddenly slapped her palm against the table, popped out of her seat and exclaimed, "No wait, dude, I got the good shit from Spike!"

That Kelly knew men who were referred to as Spike did not surprise me. She was the one who had hired me two years before, and even back then I thought that she was at least twenty-five. It wasn't that she looked old (except maybe in the eyes), she just had this raspy, mature-sounding voice, the kind you get from drinking whiskey and playing poker and hanging around in tattoo parlors with the likes of Spike.

Before I had a chance to react, the three of them were dashing out back. The last time I had smoked pot was before Craig, Craig who believed that beer was the only good drug. Even then, I was always really prissy about it. Someone else would pack a bowl, light it, and I'd take a few hits before it got too hot. But I was single again, so I figured what the hell?

Did I already mention it was February? Because it was absolutely freezing outside. As soon as I opened the back door, that arctic wind hit my face and I couldn't even move my own lips. Kelly, Chuck, and Rob were all huddled behind the Dumpster. None of us thought about coats. I stood in front of Rob, the best natural cold-blocker because of his size. Chuck passed me the joint. Now, for the last three years, I had strictly been a cigarette smoker, so I took a

big long drag and held it. That is, I held it until my eyes filled with water and my chest hurt so badly that I hacked it all up in little sputters of smoke. Kelly took the joint with a smirk and looked at me. She put it to her lips and took three little hits that whistled. The pot kept going around and I coughed, inhaled some more, coughed, passed, puffed.

I didn't feel anything. Chuck put his arm around me and opened the door. The lights were way too bright inside and everything was a little speckled. I slumped back in the booth. Rob brought me a strawberry milkshake. I slurped up the shake, the best damn shake I ever had, and I lit a cigarette. My chest was so tight that I just knew I was getting cancer right then and there. But I smoked it anyway. Everything was OK.

As my head fell against the wall, I began to understand how Kelly could find time to relax. It would be an entirely different day that I would find out where all her energy came from.

Mike was one of the good regulars. He was good in the sense that he always ate the same thing—cheeseburger, Coke, fries—and because all you had to do was talk to the poor, pathetic guy and he'd tip a five-dollar bill. He was bad in the sense that he was creepy.

He worked midnights stocking shelves at a grocery store and always wore a white oxford shirt, black slacks and a black tie. His hair was parted to the side and had a cowlick in the back that made him look like a thirty-three-year-old little boy. And he sounded like one too. His voice was raspy but whiny and his tongue was too thick for his mouth, so that if you closed your eyes when he spoke, you would think you were talking to a mentally challenged person. And who knows, maybe he was.

Most of the time he would talk about going down to Indianapolis for the big car races or driving up to Chicago to get really smashed with his friends. Sometimes he would add, "Yeah, I'll probably pick you up, take you with me to party," with mouthfuls of ground beef dribbling onto his chin. I would just nod, confident he was lying about the whole thing anyway. I mean the guy lived in his parents' basement. He probably didn't have friends.

Before he left, he'd stand by the counter watching me check on other tables. He'd just walk over to the servers' station and linger after paying his bill. He would stand there as I grabbed mugs and dumped ice into glasses, trying to strike up one last bit of conversation. I would give in and indulge him, all the while trying desperately to give as many *Please leave me alone now* signals as possible. I would say things like, "Gee, ya know, Mike, I really can't wait until my

BOYFRIEND comes in, because after work my BOYFRIEND and I are going to go see this movie. Yeah, but you know, my BOYFRIEND and I probably won't even watch the movie at all. My BOYFRIEND and I will probably spend the whole time sucking face, because that's usually what the two of us do. That's all we do." He'd surrender and place the five-dollar bill in my hand, the bill he'd been holding the whole time he was standing there, like I'm some dog that does tricks for a treat.

Around Christmas, Mike came in carrying a big rectangular box wrapped in shiny green paper. He took his usual seat and sat smiling with his fingertips tapping the table. I approached the table cautiously and said, "How's it going, Mike?"

"I brought your present, open it!" he said.

I sat down on the very edge of the opposite seat and lifted the box onto my lap. "You really shouldn't have gotten me anything," I said, somewhat perplexed, slowly peeling back the wrapping.

"You like it?" he bounced.

"A lava lamp," I exclaimed, in that way you do when you're five and wake up Christmas morning to discover Santa brought you white cotton underwear.

I held it up so my co-workers could see. They covered their mouths and ducked down low to conceal their laughter.

"Wow, Mike . . . I . . ."

"It's orange, and it's the good kind. Fifty bucks. I was gonna get you perfume, but I thought this was more you."

I stood up. "I should go put this in back."

"You better hide it so no one tries to steal it."

"Um, yeah, thanks a lot, Mike. This is really very nice." I patted him on the shoulder the way you would someone who needs affection, but happens to be covered in . . . I don't know . . . vomit.

I sat in the back and smoked a cigarette. I felt bad, but I didn't go back out there that day. I let someone else have the five bucks. I never brought the lava lamp home, either. I didn't feel like explaining to my parents that I was using this poor guy because he tipped well. And I didn't want them to get all excited and think I had met some nice hippie boy.

Mike kept coming in, seemingly unhurt, still smiling a little crooked and loitering around the waitress station day after day. The following Christmas, I received a green lava lamp.

I didn't think it'd be different from any other restaurant that I'd worked at except that here I had to wear nylons. I absolutely hate nylons because they



make your body feel totally mummified, but I put up with it because in six months I'd be twenty-one and could start serving instead of just seating which, at a place like this, means a few extra hundred dollars. And I needed that money. Bad.

It was my second day, and I stood at the reception podium learning the official hosting touch-screen software. Do you believe they make such ridiculous things? Customers would come in and I'd consult with the ominous glowing screen: *Please seat table 75*, it would read, followed by a little smiley face and a map with arrows that instructed you how to navigate the restaurant properly in order to arrive successfully at Table 75. Fucking ridiculous.

Maybe it was the computer stressing proper etiquette, or maybe it was the nylons cutting off my circulation, but I couldn't walk right when I was seating people. Are you supposed to fold your hands in front of or behind you while you walk? Or do you just let them flail naturally? How much ass swinging is called for in a fine-dining type establishment? Is the one-foot-crossing-slightly-over-where-the-other-left-off, hip-swaying strut appropriate in this situation? I struggled with this for the first hour or so, before coming to the conclusion that since my uniform required nylons and black slip-on heels, strutting in this manner was encouraged.

Throughout the night, I had pulled out a lot of chairs, smiled at many *Thank you, sweeties*, and placed many napkins on a not so wide variety of laps. Most of the laps were upholstered by Calvin Klein or Donna Karan in an array of pinstripes and conservative prints fashioned out of silk-polyester blends. Most of the female customers had dyed hair and looked about twenty-eight, except for the puffy clumps of collagen beneath their skin in the places where wrinkles should have been. Their hands told their true age; the flesh a grayish color over the bluish rivers of veins and under the brown spotty blotches. Both male and female wrists were adorned with single strings of diamonds. On the knobby fingers of the male customers rested inch-wide gold rings with Greek letters engraved. The majority of the diners were men, men in navy suits, red ties and white hair. The majority of the diners were men with money to spend.

After seating what felt like hundreds of people, my feet began to ache. I started thinking about how very phallic high-heeled shoes are, and it was about this time, I noticed just how phallic the entire restaurant was. The light fixtures were long tubes that hung down and came to a point; the melted candles looked like pathetic little half-erect penises; the shape of the wine glasses, the spoons, the water fountain outside the grand picture window spewed out symbolic sperm.

I know what you're thinking. You're thinking that I am some psychotic feminazi. Just give me a minute.

I reverted back to thinking about my poor feet, because, well, they were throbbing. I looked again at the heels of my shoes and realized that maybe three-and-half-inch heels weren't made for hostessing, and I wondered why I didn't notice this when I was at Nordstrom buying the damn things. I peered around at the ground, trying to compare heel sizes with the other women who worked there. I peered and peered and peered and either all the women had very large feet and were partial to shoes with tassels, or I was the only woman working in the dining room.

I approached Tom, the assistant manager who was in the middle of a conversation with one of the waiters. Supposedly, none of the staff were related, but they all appeared to have shared DNA. It was as if dark, greasy, slicked-back hair was as much a part of the uniform as the cummerbunds and bow ties. They all had names like Bruce and Chip and Jack, like they had all originally been manufactured by some toy company to be alternative companions for Barbie, but she refused to mate with any of them so now they were just waiters.

"Did you check out that new, leggy cocktail waitress with the frizzy hair upstairs?" Tom was asking one of the clone toys.

He nodded.

"I got a date with her tomorrow night, and my hot tub's working again."

There was an exchange of masculine shoulder-punching before Tom noticed me.

"Oh, hey, doll, you catchin' onto everything okay?"

I glanced over my shoulder on the off chance that there was some chick named Doll behind me before I began with an inescapable roll of my eyes, "Uh, yeah, things are going great. I've got all the table numbers memorized and I know the menu, so I was thinking that maybe you should just start training me to serve now, you know, just have someone of age run my drinks." As I said this, I tried to envision my size-zero body in a shoulder-padded tux.

Tom put his hand over his mouth, I assume, trying to avoid a fit of laughter. "Sweetie, all you'll be doing is running drinks."

"No, sweetie, we serve food, too," I corrected him.

He sighed and looked up into the air. Bringing his hands together like he was about to give me a sermon, he said, "Doll, this is a traditional dining room. Our servers are . . . well, they're professionals." He began stroking my arm. "You'll be in the lounge with the other girls."

Something struck me about the way he emphasized the word *tra-di-tion-al*,

as though it hadn't been a goddamned tradition for woman to bring men (in this case, of the business variety) their motherfucking food for like centuries.

He was still caressing my arm, and I took a step backwards to restrain myself from hitting him. "So, basically, Tom, what you are saying is that in order to serve fine cuisine, you've gotta have a COCK?"

A few of the people at nearby tables dropped their forks. Tom held his breath and shifted his eyes around, probably hoping that the owner wasn't making an entrance at that moment.

"Because, really, TOM, if it would please you, I could go down to the corner store and by a nice big DILDO, something maybe in a hot pink or maybe a more boyish blue, and I could STRAP IT ON to make myself more PRESENTABLE. Is that what it takes to get the job you want in the twenty-first century? Or do I just have to SUCK YOU OFF?"

The difference I had not yet learned between slinging hamburgers and working in upscale joints is that in the former you are permitted to get sassy and direct when a customer or boss begins verging on sexual harassment or discrimination. In upscale joints, there are consequences.

Tom closed his eyes and held up his index finger. His mouth hung open as though he was set on pause. The room was still. Not a bite was taken.

"I think I have to let you go," he whispered, his mouth moving, the rest of him still stuck on pause.

I slipped the shoes off my feet, reached up my skirt, and tore those body-binding pantyhose off my legs. "Here," I said, draping the nylons over Tom's stunted shoulder, "Consider these a souvenir, pin 'em up in the locker room or do whatever it is you people do."

With my shoes in my hand, and my head high, I strutted out the door.

You'd always see this guy walking down Burnham Avenue. He didn't just wander around like a bum. He was brisk, like he was perpetually running ten minutes late for some important meeting. Only you knew that wasn't the case because this guy looked like a bum, and you figured that if he had important business to attend to, he would've owned a car or lived in a city where the other important people are.

Charlene rolled her eyes when she saw him bustling his way through the crowded Sunday afternoon crowd. She adjusted her big gray bouffant with one hand as she motioned him to follow her. She tossed a menu on one of the tiny tables in the back corner where we usually ate after our shift. As the guy sat down mechanically, his eyes fixed in a perpetual stare, I could hear the waitresses



already arguing over who had to take him. After a few rounds of rock, paper, scissors, Gayle begrudgingly snatched a pot of coffee and headed to the table.

Gayle was the loudest, feistiest waitress on staff. When she waited on perverted older men, she'd be sure to smack their ass before they even got a look at hers. She'd crack jokes and say brash things when her customers paid, like, "If I blow ya, will ya let me keep the change? I gotta kid at home still thinks there's a Santa."

She pounded the glass of water down on the man's table, managed to dump some coffee into his cup, and quickly retreated back behind the counter. Charlene rushed to her side and harshly whispered, "Just give him his own pot and ignore him. Maybe he'll leave."

Charlene could be a sweet old lady if she wanted, always sending her regulars birthday cards and buying us hostesses presents. She and her husband Denny had run this place forever. The kitchen closed every day at three so they could make bingo hour and do retirement-type-people things. It was also a strategic way to avoid customers like this man, limiting their clientele to those respectable people who dine during the day.

That day, my only job was to help the servers, so I stood behind the half wall that divided the server's area from the dining room, and I looked at the man.

He lit a cigarette with a match and the flame bounced in his trembling hand. He wore army fatigues and boots and a green shirt with a name sewn on a strip of canvas over the breast pocket. Andrews. Dog tags dangled around his neck, three sets, though only one was still a pair. From time to time, after taking a drag of his smoke, he'd place one of the single dog tags in between his teeth and clench his jaw until it seemed to hurt and he'd release. His eyes were fixed in space, not looking ahead at anything, but as though there was a projection screen before him flashing images of the past.

The restaurant was filled with the sounds of voices and clanging dishes and jingling change and the register drawer clicking open and closed, but Andrews was surrounded by an eerie silence. His mouth opened and his dry sunburned lips formed inaudible words. As I walked by with a pot of coffee, I could hear his deep, quiet voice, "Let's not take the path, Bob," he said, his eyes still staring at the invisible screen, "Not today. I got a bad feeling, those VC, I don't trust 'em, Bob."

I stopped and put a hand on his shoulder. The man lowered his head like a shamed child. With callused hands, he clutched the dog tags. Peering over him, I could see that his hair was filthy, but not unwashed. It seemed covered with the sort of dust that you expect to swirl in the air when a helicopter takes

off. His skin was so tanned that if it wasn't 1996, I would swear to you that Andrews had just come home from his tour.

Charlene tramped over to the table and I quickly scurried away. "We're closing early," I heard her say, tapping the bill. "I need you to pay."

She stood with her arms crossed while he fished in his breast pocket and gently placed two dollars on the table. He rose slowly and a few heads turned as the ghostly soldier somberly marched out the door.

I knew it wasn't a good idea to be an eighteen-year-old girl sitting alone in a restaurant at the precise hour when the bars closed, but, like my dad said, when you're "on the drugs" you don't make smart decisions. My dad knew. He had been "on the drugs" for sixteen years, my mom just four less; they had "sold the drugs," "recovered from the drugs," and embarked upon the humanitarian effort of helping others to "get off the drugs." What I was doing at this time then was no more than carrying out a family tradition, part of crossing the threshold into becoming an adult.

I was drawn to this restaurant on this particular Sunday night because something about it looked familiar. From the outside, it was a glass sunroom—inside there were mauve swiveling chairs, diamond-patterned carpeting, and fake vines that climbed the banisters leading up the two-step incline to the smoking section. As the waitress showed me to my table, it hit me. This was the place we used to come when I was a kid after those late-night NA meetings. They'd push four tables together, and all the *Hello, my name is whatever and I am a \_\_\_\_\_ addict*s would talk like normal people, gossip, unwind from all the crying and hugging, and forget about the twelve steps, while I would push two tables together and attempt to sleep. My mom would order me a hot chocolate made with milk, not water, and then join the others in conversation.

I asked the waitress for a cup of hot cocoa for old-times' sake and pulled my Russian history books out of my bag to study for an exam. Just because I was "on the drugs" didn't mean that I still didn't get straight As. It didn't mean I spent my time squatting and strung out in a dilapidated warehouse. It was only, like I said, a tradition, like putting tinsel on the Christmas tree or carving the Thanksgiving turkey.

After about an hour of flipping through my notes and various texts, my head was reeling with confusion. And again, it wasn't the drugs, I swear. See, the problem with Russian history is that your internal pronunciations never match the actual pronunciations that your doctorate-holding teacher abides by. This leads you to believe there are twice as many important figures than really existed.

I lit a smoke and stared out the window, trying to sort out all the Nikolais and Alexanders. I sensed someone's presence standing over me, shadowing my already dimly lit notes. I took a drag on my cigarette, noticing a lack of cars in the parking lot, and prepared to face the usual generic drunk who would no doubt slur, "S'whacha writin'?" to which I would no doubt reply, "A manifesto on castration" or, if in a more flirtatious mood, "A letter to my girlfriend," or sometimes just, "Hi, I'm fifteen."

A man put his large, wrinkled, gaudy gold ring-adorned hand on the seat across mine and I turned my head. It was the owner, a slick-black-haired, big-bellied, Greek. The words, "Never work for a Greek, they don't respect Americans or women," rang through my head, words spoken by every veteran waitress I'd ever known. I smiled.

The man sat down. "You study hard and you are beautiful."

His eyebrows were thick and unruly. His nose looked swollen with age and I could see his every pore opening up.

"Mmm-hmm," I grumbled, looking around cautiously. I was the last customer, my waitress was nowhere in sight, and the lights in the kitchen were off. "Aren't you open twenty-four hours?"

I glanced out the window. The restaurant was set back a good forty yards from the road. I couldn't see any headlights.

"Except Sunday. Even bars close on Sundays in Indiana."

I began gathering my books. He waved his hand.

"No need for that. You, my darling, can stay as long as you like. I would hate to interrupt your studies." He reached his hand out. "What's your name?"

My eyes scanned the room for objects that could be used as weapons: butter knives, brass pots filled with silk flowers, the mauve chairs. It didn't matter. This old man was three times my size.

"What's yours?" I muttered, leaning back in my chair.

He rose and walked towards the exit with a key in his hand. He locked the glass door. "Call me Papa," he said over his shoulder with a grin that made me lose my breath.

I shoved everything into my bag and zipped it, pulling my coat on.

"Don't leave me already, dear."

My body froze and I watched him take his seat again. "I-have-class . . . morning," I stammered. "I have to go."

"You should let me take care of you. I'm going to Greece in two weeks. Why don't you come with? Give Papa your address," he slid a napkin across the table and pulled a heavy pen from his pocket.



My chest tightened. I wondered if I had the guts to jam the pen in his eye. I spotted a bus boy from the corner of my eye. In my experience, bus boys do not speak English. I stood up anyway. The Greek grabbed my arm, he rubbed it, and I thought I was going to puke. This was not the drugs.

"Sit down, darling." His grip tightened. He did it so nonchalantly, tilting his head, breathing calmly, evenly.

I grabbed his keys from the table, loosened my arm, and rushed to the exit, standing between the glass and the bus boy. I unlocked the door with a trembling hand and threw the keys on the floor. I ran the twenty feet to my car, jumped inside, started the engine, burst into laughter, then tears. This was not the drugs, not just the drugs anyway.

Frank and Janet were my favorites, every Sunday, the table by the window—he on the left connecting the dots and filling in the puzzles on the disposable children's menu—she on the right tossing her head back in constant laughter, her long, silver, feather-shaped earrings fluttering, both of them talking about their grandchildren—ages five, seven, and nine. He cringed when the bill came, pulling out his leather tri-fold wallet, saying to his wife, "When are you going to start pulling your weight around here, forty years I've been buying your meals?" his big round belly bouncing along to his jolly chuckles. She touched my arm with her soft, pruney hand, saying to me in her wavering grandmother voice, "When you're a famous movie director, you have to promise to put some penis in your movies. I'm sick of only gettin' to see boobies."

Al used to scare me, the way he came in, sitting at the counter alone, demanding his ashtray, coffee, and water in bitter one-word grunts, never taking off his wool-lined windbreaker, pointing silently at his mug whenever the coffee was over a quarter inch below the rim of his mug, lighting his unfiltered Camels with matches, hacking and coughing like he had the core of an apple lodged in his throat, smiling a sad, old, skeletal grin whenever you told him to "Get your own damn coffee if you need it so bad" and then slumping over to the coffee maker, pouring himself a warmup or sometimes making a fresh pot, trudging back to his seat, scribbling down numbers on a napkin and grinning, "After sixty years, darlin', I'm finally ready to marry you, all ya gotta do is pay my bills, do my laundry, and sing me to sleep," his laughter turning into more coughing as he'd eventually leave, only to scuff through the door again a few hours later.

Mike always took the six-seater booth all to himself because he was six-foot-two and needed the space and felt privileged since he was the owner's

buddy, tramping through the door every morning, his hair freshly trimmed, tossing the hostess five dollars for her lack of trouble, rubbing and pinching his red veiny nose as though he was afraid it might fall off, cracking jokes with the fat old “connected” Cal City Italians at the round table beside his, scooping his eggs into his mouth like the Feds were waiting for him outside the door, his eyes bulging and shifting, smiling all the time like his facial muscles had petrified, leaving his waitress five, ten, sometimes twenty dollars, coming in every morning until he put a gun to his head and left behind only a note that read, “It seems less pathetic to be a dead thirty-year-old drug addict.”

Tim, the musclehead toting that woman we always called Barbie, that woman who for months sat at a table opposite his trying to seem like she was looking away from him but batting her eyelashes in his direction, walking through the door each month with larger breasts—January B-cup, February C. By double D she and Tim were at the same table—Tim the musclehead with the wife-beater tank top and spandex shorts, the neck the size of my waist (and the dick the size of my pinky, or so we assumed); she, tanned in low-cut tank tops, teased blond hair and glossy eyes, not empty or void only a little sad; Tim calling to the waitresses, whistling through mouthfuls of oatmeal, tossing around his permed mullet; that woman, just pushing her food around her plate, never bringing the fork near her pink pouty lips, taking small slow slips of her water, gazing at Tim as though there were still a million tables between them.

Tammi who worked at the restaurant down the street flinging her tired body into a booth, lighting a smoke, warming her hands around her coffee cup; her daughter, Kelsey, beside her laying out her newest dolls on the table and trying to feed them spoonfuls of water; Tammi, wiping the moisture from the little plastic faces; Kelsey, never taking a breath as her tiny voice squeaked, “. . . and the *Li'l Mermaid* was on and tomorrow's my birthday and I'm gonna be four and . . .” holding up her fingers proudly until one of us took her hand and brought her in the back; Tammi at the table, a hand on her forehead counting out aspirin; Kelsey in the back, sitting on the countertop, expertly spurting whipped cream onto her mommy's milkshake like a big girl.

That short, flannel-wearing guy who always came in at one in the morning, asking for only one cup of coffee, never having the money to pay, his every cent spent on crystal rocks that he kept in a plastic baggy next to his pipe. That couple, early forties, ordering then arguing, she always taking the keys and driving away before the food came, he always laughing to himself, eating, wrapping up her food, and walking dinner home to his “emotional, irrational, but all the more lovable” woman. Those two guys, the chubby one with the same

Bryan Adams T-shirt, the other, gangly with bad skin and glasses, always role-playing, requesting to be called by their vampire names, Drakken and Raul, rolling a twenty-sided die across the table, earning dexterity and charisma points for their characters, then sheepishly asking the new waitress for her phone number. Those cops who'd get us out of tickets, the stalkerish exes, the high-school football players, the old lonely women, both the grumpy and the kind; the Baptists, the everyday Christians, the bikers, the little local boys on their Roller Blades, the drunken men and their feminine punching bags, the drug dealers, the Avon ladies, the one big happily dysfunctional restaurant family.

I met him in a restaurant. I know, already this sounds like bullshit because the only kind of guys you stumble across in restaurants are drunks and thirty-year-old losers, and greasy-haired chauvinists and all that stuff I already said, but no lie—this is our story, or my end of it anyway.

There was this place down the street from where I worked. It was a nicer restaurant: carpeted floors, cushy booths, painted walls, better food, and they even had those sailboat paintings. I'd go there from time to time before my shift started to get some writing done without being bothered. One day, I sat alone in a booth working on a short screenplay adaptation of Burroughs's story, "A Junky's Christmas." Back then, I thought the tale of a drug addict who gives his dope to some suffering foreign kid was heartwarming. This should tell you something about the frame of mind I was in, that is, I was in a very, very sad state.

In between sips of coffee and puffs from my smoke, I'd jot down stuff in my notebook: SCENE 3. DINGY RUNDOWN HOTEL ROOM. GLOOMY AFTERNOON. I printed each letter carefully, stroking the pen in stiff little lines across the page, creating my own little perfect font as though my fingertips were imprinted with typewriter parts. It may be completely neurotic, but back then I thought those words were all I had. You could see it in my eyes. They were all glazed over like I had glassy shields built in over my pupils. I was that defensive. I didn't even talk to people unless I was at work and even then it was that automatic kind of sweet or that bitter sarcasm that you say with a smile but really do sincerely mean.

As I lifted my eyes from the page, I saw a waiter walking by. Now *saw* isn't quite the right word to explain it; it was more like I glanced up from my paper and there was this beautiful man with spiky dirty blond hair and my eyes opened wider and those glass shields fell out and I fell in love right there. I wouldn't have admitted that to you then, though, see, because then I did not *believe* in love or fairy tales or in the existence of decent people for that matter.



This waiter, he was looking at me, too, stretched his neck up so he could keep staring as he brushed past the half wall dividing the smoking section from non. I almost thought he was going to run into someone.

I lit a cigarette and tried to focus on my script, but I couldn't concentrate. I tried staring at my frail pale little arms and imagining track marks, just to, you know, get inside the minds of my characters, but nothing was working. My pen dangled over my notebook, but suddenly I didn't want to write the damn adaptation anymore. Suddenly it seemed too, I don't know, depressing.

I dropped my pen on the table and crossed my legs and my foot kind of bounced around, swimming through the air. I stared out the window. It was a sunny day, the sky so blue and bright I couldn't even explain it except to say that it looked like some sort of cartoon. I studied the decor of the restaurant. Everything was burgundy and teal and trimmed in oak. I kept gazing around hoping that waiter would walk by again. And he did. A number of times. We'd look at each other and my eyes would bolt down sheepishly to the safety of my notebook, and I'd get this big silly grin on my face and then my eyes would pop back up again, and the stupid smirk on his face would be a mirror image of mine. And then he'd scurry into the back and it'd be over.

The marquee in the strip mall across the street said it was 4:40. My shift started at five. I knew it took me at least twelve minutes to drive down Route 41 at that time of day. My waitress had left my bill. All I had to do was pay. I lit another cigarette, *not* because I wanted anyone in particular to talk to me, mind you, I just had to finish that hotel room scene. I read what I'd written so far to myself in a whisper.

"Ya want some more coffee?" I heard a man's voice ask.

He was standing over my table, the waiter with the spiky blond hair. Up close, you could tell he'd had braces; his teeth were the whitest straightest teeth in the whole world. His lips were the perfect shade of pink against his fair skin, and they were the shape of a heart, rising to two little points on the top and just the right amount of plump poutiness on the bottom. Now, I didn't always examine people's faces this way, it had just been that long since I was interested.

I peered inside my coffee cup. It was practically filled to the brim.

"Okay," I said, nodding at him.

He skidded away but returned thirty seconds later without any coffee at all. He was kind of nodding to himself, like there was some sort of tiny voice over his shoulder giving him instructions. He sat down in the booth across from me and turned his legs to face towards the aisle.

"You studying for finals?" he asked.

“Sort of. I’ve gotta finish this script.” I sort of mumbled the script part because I thought it sounded lame. See, for awhile I dated a whole slew of *poets*, one for a whole three years, and because they sucked so bad, I began to equate people who wrote with people who were losers or assholes.

“A script? That’s fucking awesome! What school do you go to?”

He had the biggest smile on his face as he spoke and it made every word he said sound happy. It intimidated me.

“Columbia,” I replied, trying as hard as I could to sound nice and keep my usual *get away from me now* tone from creeping into my voice.

“Are you serious? For film?”

I nodded. I couldn’t really move my lips too well because now that big stupid grin was on my face again. I think most of it was because I was glad to be talking to a guy who didn’t try to always speak in eight-syllable words.

“I went there for film, but only for a year,” he said as he slid over and sat across from me.

“Really,” I said dropping my pen, “Did you quit because the people drove you crazy?”

“You mean because all anybody can ever talk about is that Scorsese fucker?”

I leaned in to the table, “And they’re always quoting from movies, it’s like they can’t even speak on their own, they have to find the appropriate movie line to get across what they’re trying to say . . .”

I can’t even tell you what else we talked about that day, but needless to say I was late for work. An hour late. When I walked through the door, my boss exclaimed, “What happened to you?” I opened my mouth to come up with some kind of excuse, but she gripped my shoulder and stared at my face and yelled, “No, I mean what is the boy’s name?”

His name is Adam and he’s not like anyone you’d usually come across in a restaurant. I can’t even explain him to you, really, or maybe I just don’t want to. Maybe I’m just selfish and want one thing all to myself that doesn’t have to go in my stories.

I met him in a restaurant. I’d hate to get all mushy and say it was fate, because I’m not mushy—I’m a rock, I tell you, really I am. But he makes me laugh when nothing else can. And, yeah, I fell in love with him.

# Devil Come To Starbucks

John Lowery

I THOUGHT IT WOULD BE THE USUAL EVENING AT STARBUCKS—COFFEE AND sketching whatever caught my eye. On October 30, 2002, the night before Halloween, a cold darkness covered the city of Chicago. The streetlights cast a jaundiced glow. The lit windows near the tops of skyscrapers disappeared into blackness, while everything and everyone on the street appeared in gradations of gray through a deep, dark gloom that reached all the way to the lake and hovered over it.

The painted green metal tables and chairs of Starbucks outdoor café had disappeared along with the extra daylight into the chilly leaf-blown autumn night. This piercing evening wind blew him into the Starbucks at Jackson and Wabash. A tall hunched figure in a black leather trench coat circled through the revolving door three times before coming in, and with each successive revolution a coldness that was colder than the one before filled the space. I thought he was just some eccentric kook and returned to thumping my nails atop my sketchpad, surveying the room for someone or something interesting to draw. A moment later I looked down to discover my hands shadowed in darkness. I slowly gazed up to the ceiling, and the overhead spotlights were still spewing out Starbucks franchised ambience, but not where I sat. I was encased in a



pyramid of icy darkness. Towering before me was the same guy who had gone through the revolving door three times. I glimpsed up at him and saw that his features were angular, hard as ceramic, his hair red and sparse. He fixed his cold, colorless eye on me and with a hand extended toward the table, asked, "May I share this space with you?" I had formed my mouth to tell him that there were empty tables, but when I looked around to confirm what I was about to say I was paralyzed with disbelief. Every table that had been available seconds ago was now filled with three, four, and even a fifth person seated around it. It all made me wonder if I had forgotten to take my antipsychotic pill that day.

There was now a line of people that snaked along the open cooler holding chef salads, pesto chicken, and an array of cookies and cakes. The entrance door was wedged open to accommodate the line of people that had spilled out into the street. While recovering from the spectacle of the crowd I hadn't noticed that, with the stealthiness of a thief, he'd removed the chair from under the table and seated himself. I didn't feel a need to be hospitable with this uninvited guest seated opposite me, so I opened my sketchbook and looked around.

Two tables over, a father who had just come in with his family plopped his small son down in a chair. The boy fell, hitting his head on the edge of the table and then screamed like a piglet. The mother went into a spastic tirade yelling at the father in a foreign language I didn't understand. But the tone of her voice was so vitriolic that it seemed to me she was hurling the vilest of expletives at him. I could have sworn I heard her say *fuck*. She picked her son up off the floor and held him to her chest, lightly bouncing him up and down. His wails lessened to whimpers, as did hers. His breathing slowed and so did hers. Her voice was rhythmically soft as she talked to him. A hauntingly somber classical guitar melody was playing in the background. A guy with spiked hair who worked behind the counter came over and gave the little boy a chocolate graham cracker. The father's face was red as he looked sorrowfully at the child. He put the palm of his hand on his son's back. The boy was now asleep, his head lolled over on his mother's shoulder. The chocolate melted in his hand and the half-eaten graham cracker fell to the floor. There was a bit too much going on for me to try to sketch this scene. After all, I wasn't Goya.

My uninvited table guest had a demitasse of espresso before him. But I couldn't recall him leaving the table or anyone bringing him anything. I scanned the room; a reserved older woman sitting alone by the window caught my eye. I decided to draw her. With her olive complexion and aquiline nose she might have been Greek, Italian, or maybe Creole. Her shellacked raven black hair pulled back severely into a bun reminded me of a pumpnickel

bagel. She wore an expensive, conservative black wool suit and the uninterested feline expression of a pampered cat. An opulent scent emanated from her, mixed with the smell of strong coffee, creating something wonderful. Baroque black pearls hung from her neck like iridescent black grapes.

“So you’re an artist,” the stranger said, looking from my sketch to the woman by the window. He continued to peer from my drawing to the woman and back, then said, “You’ve captured the old bitch’s beak and chin but you haven’t captured those bitch eyes of hers.” I stopped drawing and looked at him. I didn’t have a ready response to what had been said, but I felt a sheepish grin spread across my face.

The woman I had now stopped sketching held her coffee cup to her lips and with an appraising gaze faintly smiled at the stranger. He returned the smile, then turned to me and said, “The old bitch thinks I’m flirting with her. I covet the pearl necklace that hangs around her crepey neck. It’s been in my family for 400 years.” What the stranger said was just a vague echo compared to what I saw. When he smiled, he exposed a jagged row of canine teeth. I didn’t want to stare so I quickly looked around the coffee shop until I saw, leaning against the wall behind the counter, a metallic ruby red electric guitar with a skull and crossbones sticker that read *Satanic Monk*. My hand trembled as I started to draw the guitar. Seconds later I heard the familiar words and voice of my mother coming from my uninvited guest: “You never stick with anything. Why didn’t you finish the sketch of the old woman?” The pencil snapped in my hand. I looked at the rubbery lips that formed these words and they were not my mother’s lips, but the intonation, timbre, tempo, enunciation—all belonged to her. My mother never failed to remind me that I was the only one of her four children who hadn’t finished college, or to remind me of my two failed marriages, three uncompleted novels, my dishonorable discharge from the marines, and my several attempts at suicide. A chill went through me, covering my skin with goose bumps. I squeezed my eyes shut and when I opened them the stranger sat staring at me, grinning as he daintily sipped his demitasse of espresso. His eyes narrowed as he sighed and clicked the cup and saucer ever so gracefully on the table.

I noticed the gold double-headed serpent ring he wore on the little finger of his left hand, which had a swastika branded on the back of it. I swallowed what I was about to ask, but the words sounded from a deep, dark place I wanted to avoid. “Who are you?” I asked. The fiend casually rested his chin in his hand, again sighed and said, “Let’s see: Prince of Darkness, the Anti-Christ, Scratch, Lord of the Flies—I don’t much care for that one—Satan, Lucifer, and

Mephistopheles—that one I like. It has a Continental ring to it, wouldn't you say so?"

I reached down into my book bag on the floor and felt around until I had in my hand the prescription bottle of pills. I pushed the top down and twisted the cap off. I took two pills out but, before putting the cap back on, decided to take another. I swallowed them with a gulp of my coffee, now cold. The people standing in line were staring at me as if I might be talking to myself. I tried to look the stranger in the eye but found myself staring somewhere just above his sparse red hair. I laughed, but it sounded more like a nervous yodel. "Are you trying to tell me that you're the devil?" I said. "I don't much believe in God *or* the devil. Did my mother send you?"

He grimaced, exposing those hideous teeth of his. I thought the veins of his temples might burst. A woman outside, probably emboldened by her need for caffeine, framed her face in her hands against the glass, peering inside for a closer look, decided *not* to come in, and scurried off into the chilling darkness.

"What does that mean, you 'don't much believe?' Either you believe or you don't. I could take your life with a snap of the fingers." He snapped his fingers.

I swallowed air and said, "I guess you're just toying with me. If you were going to strip the flesh from my bones, you'd have done it twenty minutes ago when you asked to share my table. But can you really take my life? I've often prayed to God for just that, to be taken out in a thunderclap, a blink of an eye, a roll of the dice."

This fiend sat before me, made a tent with his fingers, and listened closely. I continued, "But you see, God never answered my prayers. I guess that's why I don't much believe. I wish I could do it myself. I've held the pills in my hand, the knife to my heart, and the gun to my temple, but I always bitch up. Even though I find life cruel and painfully boring, it's become a habit. And maybe it's also fear of the unknown. You see, I'm more comfortable with the devil I *know* than the one I don't. I've learned to live with the devil that makes me roam the streets uttering my private thoughts in public when I don't take my meds. Or the devil in these pills that makes me neatly fold my emotions like laundry and stick them away in a drawer inside of me that I can't seem to open."

He yawned, then said, "Think about slavery, the Holocaust, lynching, Britney Spears—all my doing. But the beat goes on. People endure, have moments of glory, make love, make war. There seems to be some homeostatic mechanism built into society that keeps it going no matter what cataclysmic evil I hurl at it. But the saving grace of evil is that it's a weed that keeps coming back. It never really goes away. It's always just below the surface, being nurtured."



"If you're really the devil, can you give me bliss? Bliss for me would be a perpetual internal morphine intravenous drip that maintained me in a functional somnambulant delirium. That would be bliss. I wouldn't have to take these pills to keep me from my paranoid delusions. Well, I don't much mind the delusions; it's the paranoid part that gives me no rest. Now with that perpetual internal morphine intravenous drip I could still be a productive member of society. I wouldn't be some burnt-out dope fiend. That way I wouldn't be a burden or an embarrassment to my family. Can you do that? Can you?"

He looked at me for more than a moment and less than a minute, then he looked around the room until he spotted the guy who had handed the kid the graham cracker. "See him?" He motioned with his head. "He fulfilled his contract with me a few minutes ago." I studied the guy from head to toe, wondering what deal he had made with this demon. He must have felt me eyeballing him because he suddenly stopped offering sample pieces of brownies to entering customers and glared at me. In the past I hadn't paid much attention to him other than to thank him whenever he waited on me. He had the typical punk-rock, emaciated look: greasy, spiked, black hair; multiple, silver, ear piercings; chin stud; and nose ring. It was an odd contrast to the regulation white shirt and green Starbucks apron he wore.

No sooner had I wondered what the transaction was between them than my table guest supplied me with the answer. With a flick of the wrist he said, "Oh, he's been plucking at that guitar with his band playing in holes-in-the-wall for nearly six years now. Remember that devilishly delicious graham cracker he gave the little boy? The chocolate coating had just enough arsenic in it to induce severe brain damage," the devil gleefully informed me. He said, "The kid will be a burden to his father for the rest of his life. You see, in exchange for six years of fame and fortune as the Satanic Monks for him and the band, Mr. Punk-rock Starbucks agreed to poison the kid. The name, Satanic Monks was my idea: rather classic, wouldn't you say? To continue, the parents will always think it was the boy's fall from the seat that scrambled his brain."

My face must have held the horror I felt because his grin was replaced with a mock glumness. Snidely he kept telling his sordid tale. "I have nothing against kids. You see, the kid's father six years ago was a pathetic drunk, a graphic artist who couldn't draw a straight line until I intervened. I found him out standing on the edge of the roof of his office building. And, like you, he didn't much believe in God or the devil. That night I made myself known to him as I have to you so there would be no confusing me with him upstairs, metaphorically speaking. I gave him career success, made him a superstar graphic artist. But

when it came time for him to fulfill his contractual obligation, he dodged me, hemmed and hawed, even attributed his talent as God-given. Well, that was too much. I'm not one to shine my light under a bushel."

I asked him, "Why harm the little boy?" He looked at me with cold, spidery, cataracted eyes and said, "There must be a reckoning; therefore, the sin of the father will be visited upon the son. The mother will commit suicide. It's all such a bitter pill to swallow, wouldn't you say? Lastly, the pathetic father will once again fall into his *mélange* of substance abuse and be right back where he started, at the edge of the roof. It all falls into place."

"But the kid didn't *do* anything," I said.

"My dear boy, there has always to be sacrifice of the innocent for the greater good of all. Didn't God sacrifice his only son? Then again, if it is as they say, you are *all* God's children, it wasn't such a sacrifice, was it?" He leaned back in his chair sipping espresso and seemed pleased with his perverted logic.

"All I really wanted tonight was a strong cup of coffee and to knock out a few sketches. Why did you have to sit at my table?" I asked him.

He took a gold case from his breast pocket and fastidiously lit a cigarette with a matching gold lighter. I was sure that a customer or one of Starbucks staff would protest, but instead a portly silver-haired man sitting at the next table obsequiously handed my table guest a small crystal ashtray. He said, "My boy, I stopped at your table because God stopped answering your prayers in your senior year of college. He let you come inches from graduating and pleasing your mother. That's all you ever really wanted to do in your life, isn't it? Then you enlisted in the marines and found out you were the lean-mean-killing machine you feared yourself to be deep down. Remember Desert Storm? You were shocked by the cool fascination you felt when you came upon the charred, severed head and its torso, twitching away the few seconds of life left in it. So you went AWOL."

"It seems like you've been keeping a time line of my life screw-ups," I said.

He said, "That's one of the things I do best. It's important for me to know who's been naughty or nice."

"You are really smug," I sneered. He smiled as if to say *indeed* and continued with his chronology of my most flagrant fuckups. "Your first marriage to the transsexual was really a hoot! How could you *not* have known? She had an Adam's apple as big as an apple! And then there were six years you spent as a writer, which led to your downward spiral and several botched suicide attempts.

"My dear boy, I stopped at your table to give you what you so cavalierly asked for, bliss. I will give you pure bliss in exchange for becoming a limitless

vessel to be filled with pure evil. Every decade or so, someone comes along with the genetic and environmental profile capable of carrying out deeds that carry the universal horror the world and I hunger for. My son, you and six thousand others under contract have chosen to undertake these deeds. Will you accept?"

I felt that I should deny, equivocate, or debate. But something from that deep, dark place that I avoided echoed inside me with a resolute *Yes*. I found myself strangely comforted when he placed his gnarled hand atop my hand and smiled his ivory-fanged smile. All my worldly troubles had vanished. Staring deep into my eyes, he spoke without words to that deep, dark place that I no longer wanted to avoid. *My son, I give you the freedom as to what form your hellish mayhem will take. It will come to you as you go forth.*

I left Starbucks that night with a calling. Outside I turned and looked inside to where I left my malevolent mentor. He was now standing before an athletic-shoed, executive-suited young woman bent over the *Wall Street Journal*.

I smiled and started on my journey. In the streetlights filaments flickered. Underneath the lights a blanket of rats scurried across the street. There was a depraved dimension to the night that pleased me. I noticed a man in a cashmere overcoat with a look of arrogance and privilege woven into his features standing immediately close to his mousy secretary, papers stuffed in a battered leather portfolio under her arm. His salacious murmurs to her were deafening to my ears. They started to walk; I followed. My senses were supernaturally heightened. As people drifted past I could hear their secrets, smell the vinegar of their fear, and taste the rotten core of their wickedness. Knowing what must be done I was beastly omnipotent and maniacally confident that I would finish whatever was started.



# My Own Poor Clown Code

James Vickery

*I'd rather have a fool to make me merry, than experience to make me sad.*

*-William Shakespeare, As You Like It*

OK, I KNOW IT'S PROBABLY NOT THE MOST ETHICAL THING TO DO, YOU KNOW, wait inside my car by a woman's home when just last week I was the clown at her son's birthday party. That's not a good thing to do. And I know that my boss, Maggie the Clown, would probably have some bad things to say about it, like I was breaking some kind of clown/client confidentiality, but at that moment I really didn't care. Alisandra had been in my head all week. Of course, I had seen good-looking moms at birthday parties before—I mean, that's to be expected, but this was somehow different. I think it was her long hair. No, maybe her smile, because she seemed to smile with everything she said, and there is something real hopeful about that. She had great, slender, brown legs, too. Legs that made my stomach hurt for some reason. Anyway, this was what I was thinking the whole friggin' week, and I wrote her name on my notebook until my friend Nick asked, "Who's Alisandra? She sounds hot." And I just shrugged and mumbled it was just some girl, but she wasn't that at all. She was a woman, a woman with a child, and I was a kid myself, and that's why this was

all incredibly stupid.

But I waited on a Sunday afternoon, a real nice day, too, because all these kids were playing outside, and I waited and waited, listening to the radio, trying to guess what Alisandra would be wearing. Hoping for an outfit that left something to the imagination, but not too much because I was never that creative, anyway.

Her neighborhood was mostly Mexican middle-class families, in small gray houses packed close together. It seemed like everybody knew each other and were happy to see each other. I, like, looked out my window at a man fixing his car, while his son handed him the tools, and his neighbors looked on and offered advice. Maybe it was because it was Sunday, or maybe it was because there was such a warm breeze, but still it was nice to watch from my little Cavalier. Sticking my hand out the window, I decided once and for all that it was definitely warm enough for her to be wearing shorts.

After an hour of waiting down the street with her house right in my line of vision, I started to get a little edgy, thinking that she wasn't going to come out of her house. I mean, couldn't she see what a wonderful day it was? All these other kids were outside playing, why wouldn't she want to bring out little Jorge? Then a terrible thought hit me that maybe she was already out with big Jorge. I didn't see a father hanging around the house when I did their party, but, still, science says that there has to be one around somewhere. Maybe today he picked them up and took them to church and then the park. What if he was a great guy like that? That would be awful.

All that went away, however, when I saw her come out through the rickety screen door holding little Jorge's hand. And she was wearing an honest-to-god sundress. It had flowers on it and everything. I hadn't even thought of that, but it was perfect. She looked so beautiful as she slowly came down the cement steps that I felt a rush of shame pass through my body. What kind of sick guy was I to spy on this poor, lovely girl? Well, I started the car anyway and crept after them down the street. Following was harder than I thought it would be, because I realized that I couldn't just keep going four miles an hour down the narrow side street, it would look suspicious enough for a neighbor to call the cops, or, worse yet, Alisandra might see me and pick up her son and start a desperate sprint away. So instead I went past them at close to normal speed and circled around the block again, returning just in time to see them go into a small grocery store up the street.

I parked the car and put on my sweat jacket. I didn't need it, or anything, but it made me look bigger, and bigger was exactly what I needed to be right then. So I went through the automatic doors of Joe and Frank's neighborhood

store, and I saw her right away. She was by the vegetables, and she was singing a sweet song to herself. I couldn't actually hear what she was singing; I could only see her lips mouthing the lyrics, but I'm pretty sure it was a sweet one. And standing there in that dress that stopped an inch or so above her knee, while she gently caressed a red ripe tomato—well, she gave me no choice but to follow through with my plan and talk to her. I just couldn't go the rest of my life without talking to her.

"Alisandra, hey, I didn't think I'd see you again." In my excitement at "accidentally" running into her again and being so happy that she was singing to herself, I completely forgot that the one and only time she saw me, I was dressed like a stupid clown. So she stopped singing her song and looked me up and down strangely before asking, "Do I know you from somewhere?"

Little Jorge tugged at her dress and pointed to the cereal aisle. Alisandra put one of her hands with perfectly painted blue nails on his head and told him in Spanish to wait a second. At least that's what I imagined she said, maybe it was, "If this man tries touching Mommy, run for help." I hoped it wasn't that.

"I guess I look a little different now. I mean I'm dressed a lot differently."

"Oh, you work at the bank, right?"

"No, no. Actually I was the clown at Jorge's birthday party a couple weeks ago, remember?" The smile of recognition didn't come right away, and for a brief flash I saw myself pushing over one of the produce tables as a distraction and making a break for the automatic doors. But then she started to nod her head slowly and smile, just a little. "Of course, I remember you. How have you been, Klumsy?"

"Klumsy, right, that's my clown name. I've been good."

"I didn't know you lived around here," she said, turning her eyes (which were soft and brown, by the way) back to the tomatoes. Jorge really wanted some cereal.

"I don't really live around here exactly. I was just working over here and needed to pick up a few things, you know."

"Yeah right . . . what, are you stalking me?"

I laughed at her little joke, awkwardly loud, because, yes, in a way I *was* stalking her, I guess. Dammit to hell. "Stalking you . . . ha ha . . . that's funny. Nope, just needed a few things," I repeated.

"Well, c'mon, Klumsy, you can shop with us. We better get some cereal, though, before this monster here tears my dress."

"I like cereal," I think I might have said. God, this woman was making me sweat. I watched her lean forward against the cart and her hips sway just a



tiny bit, and I started to feel that familiar ache filling my stomach.

“So what’s your real name, Klumsy? That’s not it, is it?”

“No, no, my actual name is—” now right here I actually considered giving a fake name because mine just sounded so boyish; I was going to tell her something like Richard or Jean Paul maybe—“Stevie” is what I really said. Why didn’t I just say Steven?

Jorge jumped up and down and pointed at a box. “Mama, Lucky Charms, I want Lucky Charms.”

“OK, OK, mijo, calm down.”

I realized quickly that I wasn’t pretending to shop at all, as I was too busy standing there like an ass with my hands in my pockets. I also realized that I had five dollars in my pocket at the moment.

So I grabbed the first thing I saw which was a box of instant rice and some canned peaches. Alisandra noticed my purchases. “Now there’s some bachelor shopping,” she said and smiled like she did a lot, and I nodded yes, it was bachelor shopping. We walked down the aisle some more, a little bit uncomfortably, and I knew I had to get into clown mode immediately. I had to be fun and animated and make this the best shopping experience of her life.

“Hey, Jorge, what’s that behind your ear?” I bent down towards him and he backed away looking scared.

“It’s OK mijo, this is the clown from your party. Remember Klumsy? This is him, but he doesn’t have on all that makeup.”

The word makeup didn’t sound quite right to me coming out of her mouth, even though it was absolutely true. I had been wearing makeup. Jesus, what was wrong with me? But her reassurance helped, and Jorge stood still while I leaned down and went towards his ear with a small red ball in my hand and pulled it out from behind his ear, to his shock and joy. He held the ball in his palm like it was a rare jewel and looked up at me like a happy four-year-old should. And it all became so clear to me exactly what I had to do. I make Jorge happy and guess who follows? The beautiful, young mother.

Alisandra pushed the cart slowly through the narrow aisle of canned goods while Jorge softly ran his small hands along the different colored cans of soup and tomato paste. Leaning against the cart she turned around and looked at me as I followed behind. A very sexy move. “Is that all you’re gonna get, for real?”

I looked at the two items in my hands and nodded my head. “Yep, got plenty of stuff at my apartment.”

“OK,” she smiled.

The floors were sticky, and my gym shoes made a sound with every step.

This place was dirty. The smell of cold, ground meat hung in the air like a cloud, and a lot of the things on the shelves had names I never heard before. Like instead of Pepsi and Dr. Pepper there was Sweet Valley black raspberry soda. And little plastic bottles of green, syrupy-looking juice. This was the kind of store you ran to when you just need one thing, not for all your shopping. But Alisandra was putting a lot in the cart, like potatoes, packages of chicken legs, and some of that green juice for Jorge. And I didn't know if it was because she couldn't afford to go anywhere else, or maybe she couldn't afford a car to take her anywhere, while taking the bus with groceries just wouldn't work, but whatever it was, it made me feel sad. It got worse when she pulled out a pile of coupons from her purse. This beautiful girl, wearing a sundress, standing in the middle of the canned food aisle with sticky damned floors holding coupons for twenty cents off a box of raisins, well it didn't seem right at all. She looked like she should be on a beach somewhere far from here, with a colorful drink in her hand and the ocean water hitting her feet. She didn't look embarrassed at all, but rather smiled at me when she noticed I was staring. "These things come in handy," she said, and I nodded.

Then we shopped like a real-life family. We laughed with Jorge and decided together if he deserved some candy. He did. She asked me if I lived at home and I said no, and she said she was kind of wanting her own place herself. And she asked me if I was in college and I said I was and she said she wanted to be.

We got up to the cashier in front, and I helped Alisandra put her groceries on the belt. She handed over the pile of coupons, and I noticed that she was watching the register closely and a little bit nervously. In a minute I knew why.

"Damn," she said under her breath, "I don't have enough."

"Do you need to put some stuff back?" the cashier asked, pulling lightly on her flowery blouse to give herself some air.

"I guess I do," Alisandra sighed, pulling off the twelve-pack of plastic green syrup juice. "Sorry, mijo, we'll get your juice later."

Jorge was right about to protest when I came swooping in like a grocery-store hero, handing over my sorry, wrinkled five-dollar bill. "This should cover it, right?"

She pushed it back. "Yeah, but I can't take that, Stevie. Don't worry about it, I'll just come back later. Plus, you need your rice."

"I don't need anything, just take it. I'll go to the cash station later." I didn't have a cash station card or money to take out if I had a card, but it didn't matter.

She put her hand to her heart, right on top of it. "Thank you. Wow, I owe you."

"Don't mention it," I said, flexing under my sweat jacket.

She paid for her things and grabbed a couple bags. "You're a nice guy, you know that?" I nodded my head like I did, in fact, know.

I helped her carry her groceries home, because why stop now? Jorge ran a little ahead of us, "But not too far," is what I called out like my dad would do, though it didn't have too much authority because my voice kind of cracked and Alisandra giggled because she thought it was either adorable or pathetic.

She unlocked her front door, and her son ran inside carrying his bag with the cereal, and I followed behind him. In the front room, Alisandra's mom sat on the couch watching some kind of Spanish game show. "Mom, guess what? This is Klumsy, the clown from last week. Remember?"

"Oh yeah," Grandma stared me up and down for a couple seconds. "What a surprise."

She knew. Somehow this old woman knew it was no accident, me running into her daughter. It wasn't fate, either, or anything nice like that. It was me spying all damn day. I started to panic, thinking that maybe she spotted my car and she was going to reach for the phone any second to call the police or my boss, but then she asked me if I wanted anything to eat and I realized it was probably just her motherly instincts that made her look at me so cautiously. But I said that I already ate and I had to get going, and Alisandra, she walked me to the door. I wanted to say something, something that would make her want to see me again, but it seemed stupid as she was holding Jorge in her arms, and her mom was sitting right there, and to everyone there I was simply a clown.

"Well," I turned around as I walked through the door, "this was a lot of fun, Alisandra."

"Yeah, it was. And thanks again, that was really sweet of you."

"No problem."

"And Jorge seems to like you. Right, mijo?" She scrunched his short black hair.

Jorge pointed at me and said, "Clown."

As I walked down the cracked front steps Alisandra called for me and my heart jumped for a second because maybe she forgot a good-bye kiss. Instead she hopped down to me and kind of whispered, "Hey, my niece Gloria is having a party in a couple of weeks. Does your company have a Mickey Mouse costume? That's her favorite."

"Oh yeah, of course."

"Well, ask if they can have someone come as Mickey?"

I saw a bright, beautiful opportunity to see her again. "I'll come. I'll get the costume and I'll do the party. Free of charge."



“Oh, that would be great,” and she gave the biggest, widest smile of the day and I realized that I didn’t know what it was, but I was pretty sure I was in love and that I just might in fact be a hero. And that’s when she hugged me. When she did, my lips were a couple inches from her ear and I wanted so desperately to kiss it, but I just whispered good-bye, already knowing that the unspoken love might be more painful than anything.

# An Investment in Velocity

Bob Whiting

BIKE MESSENGER 78 CARRIED MAIL FROM HIS MOTHER, A HOMEMAKER FROM Royal Oak, Michigan. He hoped she didn't worry, but he knew better. He kept them in a waterproof pocket of his bag. When work slowed in the midafternoon, he would lean against a skyscraper, legs splayed out across the sidewalk, and hold the cards in his fingertips. They were mostly postcards and news clippings. The postcards showed the lakes and harbors he swam in as a kid. More than anything, he wanted her to stop worrying, but the cards were mostly chatty and elusive regarding the matters that had estranged him from the family. The news clippings spoke of the dangers of smoking and alcohol abuse, the importance of a clean appearance, and the motivation to succeed in life. She never directly mentioned the danger of his lifestyle except to say, "Son, take care of yourself." The cards weighed about two ounces. They were signed "Love, Mom," but he knew it was a kind of concerned love, and it kept him up at night. When the late afternoon rush hit, 78 would pull himself to his feet and carefully return the mail to his bag. Slowly, a bit distracted, he would get on his bike and sift through rush hour.

The things they carried were dictated mainly by necessity. The couriers carried manifests for PODs, company ID for the maze of downtown security,

and a watch to reconcile the two. 51, who had a caffeine habit, carried hot coffee in his free hand, rarely spilling a drop. 26, who practiced field hygiene, carried a damp soapy rag and deodorant in a Ziplock bag. 78 also carried deodorant, but never used it. 61 carried Myelin given to him by another messenger who had it prescribed to him after a crash. 26 did the same with Tylenol 3. 251, who was scared, carried a prayer card featuring the Act of Contrition so he would be in a state of grace when he was killed at the intersection of Adams and Clark in mid-December. 17 carried a couple hundred bucks in cash on his person at all times to fuel his successful loan-sharking venture. They all carried the Motorola open-channel radio. It weighed a pound and a half. They were sensitive to rain and the batteries frequently died. The steel and concrete of Chicago's skyscrapers often proved too much for their signals. Until he was killed, 251 carried a quarter ounce of street-grade dope, which for him was a necessity. 47 carried condoms and pep pills. 26 carried a bowl disguised as a Hi-Liter. 78 carried a rarely written-in journal. 251, who was scared, kept a large bandage clipped to the outside of his bag so people would see it and use it when he was run over. Double-Double 33 carried sketches he made during the course of the day. On Monday and Thursday nights, 51 carried thirty pounds of EMT gear to his medical night class at Malcolm X College. One of these evenings the weight of the gear shifted as he was jumping off a curb, driving his concussion-bound head into Damen Ave. What they carried depended largely on the weather. A rainy, cold day meant an extra ten pounds of jackets, Gore-Tex socks, neoprene gloves, fenders, and plastic blueprint and radio covers. Because the weather could turn so quickly, each man carried a plastic package cover. It weighed a half-pound and was worth every ounce. When decommissioned, it made a great laundry bag. It was very versatile. In December, for instance, when 251 was killed, the messengers used the plastic to cover his body from the rain until the ambulance came and took him away.

Almost everyone carried photographs. 78 carried a picture of his family taken three years ago at Christmas time at the Detroit Athletic Club. They sat at a round table in the main dining room, eating prime rib. 78 had shaved for the photo, much to his family's relief. The picture was taken right before he was kicked out of college. The family smiled as a happy nuclear unit, blissfully unaware of the impending problems. I should have done something responsible, he thought. I should have been a better son. He often thought of the things he should've done.

All the bikers at the company carried a messenger bag of sorts. 61, Double-Double 33, 26, 78, 251, 16, and 47 carried the common Timbuck2 messenger



bag made of waterproof Cordura nylon. 61 carried his on his right shoulder because he broke his left collarbone racing track at the velodrome. 51 and 36 carried the less common, just as capable, Chrome bag with the forty-ounce malt liquor holsters and secret dope pocket. Big Gay 72, 17, and Superdave 19 had custom bags acquired sometime during their veteran tenures. Depending on the preparedness or paranoia of the owner, the bags weighed anywhere from five to thirty-five pounds “clean,” or without packages. They had little say in what they were paid to carry and deliver. A forty-pound banker’s box on their back made it difficult to thread rush-hour traffic. They carried blueprints, filings, subpoenas, flowers, lost eyeglasses, contraband, just about anything the client would pay for. The typical load per order was only a pound or two. But 251 was carrying seven orders when he was killed at Adams and Clark, and he went down under an exceptional burden, more than twenty pounds of packages, plus the bike and the bandages and prayer cards and dope and all the rest, plus the unweighted fear. He became gravity’s plaything. There was no rolling or skidding. 36, who saw it happen said it was like watching a bird fly into a glass window—just smack, then down—not like you’d imagine it, none of the screaming bystanders or screeching brakes. Not like that, 36 said, just smack, then down. Nothing else. It was a cold, rainy, mid-December day. 36 got on the radio and called in, “Biker down,” and all the messengers congregated to Adams and Clark. They stripped his bag and packages, all the heavy things, and 26 said the obvious, “The guy’s dead.” Then they covered 251’s body from the rain with his plastic and sat smoking the dead man’s dope. 78 kept to himself. He stared at the plastic pile, and now 251 was dead because he couldn’t be an adult.

They carried the weight of their bikes up stairs and over roadblocks. Each messenger had one as a soldier has a rifle or a shortstop has a glove. There were a few views on this vital piece of equipment. 61, 251, and 78 held light weight and mechanical simplicity above all else. Their single-speed and fixed-gear track bikes weighed eighteen pounds. 26, 51, Big Gay 72, 47, and Double-Double 33 liked having a range of gears to handle hills, wind, weather, and mood. Their road bikes weighed twenty-one to twenty-six pounds. 36, 17, and 16 prized comfort and all-terrain handling, so they delivered on mountain bikes ranging from twenty-eight to thirty-six pounds. Superdave 19, who loved to bounce down stairs and make motorcycle noises, rode a full-suspension downhill rig, weighing in at a leg-burning thirty-eight pounds. They were required to wear a helmet and uniform at all times during the workday, although Superdave 19 was the only one to follow this rule. Helmets were draped from bags or left behind altogether. They only weighed a pound but felt heavier on hot days.

Bike cops gave tickets for helmet violations and sometimes worse. When 61 was caught without a helmet, the three police who beat him carried loaded Glock 9mm semiautomatic pistols, extra clips with nine rounds each, batons, Mace, knives, radios for backup, and the immunity of their badges.

78 carried his dad's army captain's bars from the sixties and a medal of the Virgin Mary given to him by his deceased grandfather. He was acutely aware of them as their metal heated and cooled with the seasons against his skin. He carried them partially out of superstition, partially out of obligation. They were a potent reminder of the successful lives his patriarchs had led and the rambling one he was living. Combined they weighed maybe ten ounces, but they pulled on his conscience much more. He blew runs because of his preoccupation, leaving other bikers to pick up his slack, like the cold, rainy, mid-December day he spaced a direct. It was reassigned to 251, who was already holding six. 36 was camped out on standby at a newsstand at the time. His dreads pressed against the Clark and Adams building, his bloodshot eyes looking off into the crowd of the returning lunch hour that belched tobacco smoke, spilled coffee, and dodged the rain as if it were death itself. A woman with an umbrella rushed by, its edge knocking his Rasta-colored stocking hat into a puddle. He mumbled some profanity and, looking up, caught sight of 251 hauling ass westbound on Adams coming towards him. 36 gave a big yelp of recognition, tossing his head back to reveal the smile usually reserved for the end of his shift. 251 locked eyes with him and returned the smile, rain pelting his face. Just then, when his face cracked the smile, a white Jeep Cherokee blew a red light and collided with him, sending him straight to the pavement. He lay in the intersection with his eyes vacantly open. There was a flat spot on his helmetless skull that leaked blood onto the street, mixing with a filthy puddle.

51 had the odd habit of carrying around a piece of tumbleweed he found in the street. Camouflage, he claimed, would never be a problem. Perhaps it was superstition, or a remembrance of his Texan youth. In much the same way, 78 carried his dad's captain's bars and his grandfather's Virgin Mary medal. The bars were scratched and worn, a source of pride for him. The bars were his dad's, but the scratches, earned in crashes and brushes with cars, were solely his. He felt he had one-upped his dad on a purely visceral level. But the bar's rank didn't apply to him, and when he thought about what his dad had accomplished at twenty-three years, it caused him to carry alcohol home from work. One night, when he broke his face on Ashland Avenue, 78 carried a blood-alcohol level of .251.

They carried Swiss Army knives, Allen tools, spoke wrenches, chain tools,

pumps, patches, and tubes, most of which was mistaken for weaponry and confiscated at federal building metal detectors. 51 carried a tube of ProLink chain lube until it broke and ran down the seat of his pants, giving him a rash for months. Superdave 19 carried everything imaginable, an unprecedented fifty pounds when clean. A full-face helmet and body armor made up ten pounds of this, except for the day he was hit in the face by an opening car door. Most of the guys read during standby. Double-Double 33 carried the *Onion*, 16 the *Chicago Sun-Times*, and 78 the *Chicago Tribune*. Superdave 19, who liked mountain bikes, carried *Bike*, *Mountain Bike*, and *Mountain Bike Action*. Big Gay 72 and 51 both carried copies of David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest*, weighing in at a formidable ten pounds apiece. 51 also carried porn he stole from the Playboy Building. 78 carried a copy of *The Things They Carried*. They all carried a variation of the U-Lock, which, coincidentally, also made a hell of a weapon. In addition to his U-Lock, Big Gay 72 also carried a marine foghorn as a weapon. 36, 16, and Superdave 19 carried wedding bands. Big Gay 72 carried an engagement ring. They carried colds, hangovers, tattoos, financial worries, an acute hatred of motorized vehicles, and a familiarity with masochism. Very few of them carried medical insurance cards. They carried sun block, cigarettes, debts to 17, and an affinity for skilled profanity. They carried the memory of 251 and the knowledge that it could happen to them at any moment. 61 now carried the weight of five such funerals. They carried the streets themselves—Chicago, the place, the asphalt—a greasy black grime that left funny lines on their skin at the borders of their socks and gloves and puddles of dark silt in the basins of their showers. They carried the air, the diesel fumes, the garbage trucks, the smog. By daylight they were cursed at, by night they were doored by cars. It was routine one minute, chaos the next. They hurried up to wait, sometimes blowing lights and slipping security, sometimes not. The weight of the workload shifted constantly to its own whims. The faster they delivered the checks and legal documents and bills, the faster corporate America would spit more out at them. The scope and quantity was amazing. It was Freeborn and Peters and Cushman and Wakefield and Foley and Lardener—they carried like blood-and-bone fax machines—and for all the ambiguities of the job, there was always the single, certain notion that they would never be at a loss for things to carry.

After the ambulance took 251 away, the messengers abandoned the workday and went to Rossi's to get shitfaced. 78 kept to himself, choosing to sit alone by the window. He sat and tried not to cry and hacked away at his bottle of beer and buried his head in his arms. They patted him on the head and



assured him it wasn't his fault, but he wasn't listening. They drank till closing, and on his way home, 78 smashed out taillights till his hands streamed blood.

For the most part they carried themselves with a crude brand of poise. Now and then, however, there were times of panic. They would feel the breeze of a passing car they didn't know was there. It happened daily, constantly. At the end of the day, they would come into base and their poise would return, like they were a bunch of ten-cent cowboys. It wasn't bravery, actually, just the fear of looking scared. They talked about getting straight jobs and getting comfortable, always recanting when someone called them a pussy. They joked about their own deaths in the future and their near deaths in the past. This bravado was based in an uncertain faith—faith that when they went between two buses, they would come out the other end, faith that the door wouldn't open into their heads, faith that a simple red light would hold four lanes of traffic at bay. They invested velocity into this faith, until it failed them and they had to be reborn.

When 78 got home the night 251 was run over, he bandaged his hands and took the postcards and news clippings and medals and photos and stuck them in a dresser drawer beside his bed. Tomorrow he would straighten up his act. He wouldn't space his runs. He would grow up. He would stop drinking and get his head together.

# 7-Eleven

Barrie Cole

ME AND HARRY HELD UP A 7-ELEVEN. THE ONE ON BIRCH ROAD, THE UNLUCKY one. It's unlucky because on the sign out front the "7" doesn't light up, only the "Eleven" does. It should have been a sign, literally. A sign of a sign. We're so fucked now. You don't even know. We deserve everything we get, every goddamn thing.

We walked right in when the girl was closing up. We didn't even know her name. She had on pink lipstick and a pink T-shirt and that kind of hair where it's one color at the top, darker-like and unevenly so, and then real light and yellowy in the middle and bottom, all the way to the ends. She was chewing gum and loading packs of Newports from a carton onto the shelf above her. We walked in and up to the counter. She said something like, "Hi, guys, I'm about to close. What can I get you?"

Henry had his rifle behind his back, and, quickly, without saying anything, he brought it out in front of him and lifted it right up to her head. She turned white, white, white. Fuck. We'd both used that rifle for squirrels, a few deer—Henry even got a wild turkey once, and that's hard as hell and rare, too, for a teenager to have the patience for a wild turkey—but neither one of us had ever held a rifle up to a girl's head, a human girl, a human, unlucky, 7-Eleven girl.

But now Henry was.

Henry held the rifle so close to her head that the rifle looked like it was attached, like it was growing out of her head. The rifle stood between Henry and the girl like a metal line, and for a long minute everything was as quiet as could be. I felt that quiet in my bones, in the core of me. It hurt. Finally, Henry yelled at me to get moving, and I did. I got a bunch of cartons of smokes, all brands, even cigars, and a whole lot of beer and those miniature bottles of booze, and so, so much candy. You name it, I took it. We didn't ask for money. We were going to, but in the end I guess we just forgot. I wonder how much we could have gotten? I'm betting five, maybe six hundred bucks. Money was going to be a problem.

Henry had his brother's pickup 'cause his brother was in New Mexico visiting some dude he heard about who builds houses out of clay. Henry's brother is always interested in stuff like that, weird stuff. Henry's family pretty much does whatever they want. His dad is an alcoholic and sleeps all the time, and his mom, well, let's just say she doesn't have all her birds in the yard or however you say it. Henry and his brother and two sisters are pretty wild. In my opinion, it's not a bad way to live.

Henry's brother's truck is a pickup with a cap on it, so I just opened up the back and threw stuff in. It was like the truck was this mouth and I kept feeding it and feeding it and feeding it. I kept running in and out of the store, my arms loaded up with 7-Eleven stuff: magazines, cans of chili, bags of Doritos and pretzels.

To tell the truth, the whole situation scared the living shit out of me. I mean, even though everything was easy and smooth and fast, too, I almost crapped in my pants. I mean, I don't even know how I did it. It was like some part of me was on cruise control. The girl was breathing heavy and so was Henry and I was, too. Our breath was like this weird motor, driving us. Inside, I felt like I'd just drunk about a million cups of coffee. My blood soared through me like wet birds.

And then, well, we just left and Henry drove and drove and drove. We didn't talk much. I said, "Jesus," a couple of times, and Henry laughed in this real sort of lunatic way. It was like burp-laughing. It wasn't funny at all. He smoked a few bowls and seemed disappointed that I didn't want any weed. A couple of hours later when we were on the freeway going north, passing green sign after green sign, Henry said, "So that was pretty cool, huh?"

"I don't know," I said.

"What do you mean you don't know?"

"I mean, Henry," I said, "that I don't know."



"Whatever," he said.

I thought about my mom then. Actually, I didn't think any thoughts about her, I just saw her in my head, her face mostly. She looked kind of sad and tired. I felt like I was to blame for how she looked. I tried to change the picture, make her younger and happier, but it didn't really work. Instead, I kept seeing her the pathetic way. And then, taking her place, I'd see the 7-Eleven girl, and then my mom sad and tired again, and then the 7-Eleven girl again, back and forth. I didn't like it. Henry turned on the radio really, really loud, so loud that the sound wasn't even clear. It was some heavy metal band from the eighties.

"Knock it off," I said.

"Fuck you," Henry said.

We're sixteen years old, me and Henry. Our birthdays are exactly two weeks apart. I'm the older one. We figured this was about the last year we could get away with something like this. Once you're seventeen, you're not considered a kid anymore. Once you're seventeen, if they decide to lock you up, you can just forget about yourself and whatever bullshit life you've planned for yourself for a good long time. I'm talking years and years and years. The worst that can happen to us is juvie. We figured eight or nine months tops. Henry said we should party it up while we can. I was guessing this was Henry's idea of what partying it up meant. As for me, I knew it wasn't *this*. I figured that if I was really partying it up I'd feel better, I'd feel somehow like I was having fun. The truth was I just felt freaked out, scared, and bad. I didn't tell Henry, but I sort of wanted to get caught, to get it over with. I kept looking in the rearview mirror for flashing lights but I never saw any, just empty black space, just night.

It took a couple of hours, but Henry finally got us to the cabins he was talking about. He seemed to be right for once. Not a soul was there. He said no one used them in the fall or winter and that they were easy to break into. They were. I guess his family went there in the summers before they turned to shit. My parents are divorced. It seems like everyone's parents are. Seems like marriage is just a crock of shit to most people. My dad left us for a whole other woman and her whole other kids. Good riddance, asshole. That's what I say. Now my mom's got this idiot new boyfriend that she's totally into. You should see her. She acts worse than some of the girls at school. She like, I don't know, swoons. Her boyfriend is a real flake. Whenever he sleeps over and I see him in the morning, he asks me if I want to know my horoscope. "Uh, no thanks," I always say. God, what a loser.

In the cabin, we got into our sleeping bags and put a flashlight in the middle of the room. I could see all this dust swirling around in the beam. It

looked magical. We brought a twelve-pack in and started to work on it. I knew that after a day like the one we had I'd never get to sleep without at least a couple of beers. I smoked some pot, too, which seemed to make Henry pretty happy.

"Wow," Henry said.

"Yeah," I said, "wow."

That seemed to sum things up pretty nicely. Then Henry said, "Brad?"

"Yeah?" I said.

"Do you think we'll ever fuck?"

"What? Are you fucking telling me you're gay, dude? What the fuck, dude? No, I don't think we'll ever fuck."

"Not each other, dipshit," Henry said.

"Then who?" I said.

"Girls," he said.

"Oh, *girls*," I said. "Yeah," I said, "I'm sure we'll fuck girls. Not tonight, but eventually."

"Guess what?" he said.

"What?" I said. I was getting tired.

"I fuck girls all the time in my dreams."

"Cool," I said, "good for you."

"Man," he said, "I'm horny. I feel like . . ."

"Dude," I said, "you're wasted. Don't even go there."

Quickly, I turned off the flashlight in case Henry was planning on doing something I didn't want to see. But he passed out. I think he drank at least seven beers and Henry is skinny like me, so that's a lot. There were these two girls once, about our age, who died from drinking. They dared each other to drink a whole bottle of vodka and when they did they passed out, choked on their puke, and died. One of the girl's dads found them in his house. Dead. That happened last year. Their names were Suzette Marks and Faith Granger. I didn't know them, but I'll always remember their names. I fell asleep thinking of them and the 7-Eleven girl and my mom again.

When I woke up the next morning I heard something crazy. It sounded like horns, like horns on acid. I swear to God. I was like, "What the fuck?" I got up off the floor and went over to the window to look. I expected cows or goats or, I don't know, a car alarm, but what I saw pretty much blew my mind because apparently Henry was wrong, and somebody *did* use these summer cabins off-season: bagpipers did, and they were here with us now! I was glad we parked the truck in the far parking lot behind the tree line. Hopefully no

one had seen it and become curious. Parking there had been my idea. "Par-a-noid," Henry had said. Still, he had done it. Thank God.

The bagpipers were all wearing those kilt things with the kneesocks and the whole bit. I couldn't believe it, of all the fucked-up things. The bagpipes themselves looked like a bunch of pipes, like the kind under a sink, stuck into a bag. They looked like something a kid would have made in art class. It was hard to believe music could come out of blowing into them.

There were about ten bagpipers standing in a line and blowing into those things for all they were worth. And I don't think they were professionals or anything, because it didn't sound like music at all. If I hadn't been so scared I would have had a good long laugh. Adults are such morons. Out of all the things there are to do in the world, these guys picked wearing skirts and blowing into pipes. Jeez. Why even bother going to college or even high school if you're just gonna end up blowing into some pipes? I wondered if they were really Scottish, like from Scotland, or if they were just people who wished they were. A guy in front of them, also wearing a kilt, was shouting directions and holding onto a clipboard like a football coach. I couldn't hear what he was saying. Our window was jammed shut and they were too far away. I could hear those bagpipes plenty loud, though. No wonder they had to come all the way out here to play. I bet their wives and kids couldn't stand the sound.

I looked over at Henry who was actually sleeping without a mattress or blanket on a bed with springs sticking out of it. He must've been even drunker than me, I thought, to be able to sleep on that. I remembered that in the night he'd said something about being afraid of bugs or mice. I'd taken the mattress. Funny how Henry wasn't afraid to stick a real gun to a real girl's head but was afraid of a spider or some itty-bitty mouse.

Henry was snoring hard, like snoring was his job, and he had one hand over his eyes to block out the light from the window.

"Henry!" I said loudly.

He didn't respond.

"Henry!" I yelled again, this time going over and shaking him.

I actually wanted to punch him in the face. I wanted to pretend that he was my dad after he left and moved in with a whole different woman and a whole different family and pretty much pretended like he never even had me, like I was some dream he finally woke up from. I wanted to punch him in the gut and cry, too, like the girliest girl. I wasn't sure what had come over me. I guess I was just tired and scared.

I didn't end up punching Henry anywhere. I just pushed him a little and



shook him some more and he said, "Dude. Come on, dude, I'm trying to sleep."

"Henry," I said, "you really fucked up this time."

"What?" he said like he was as innocent as an angel.

"Henry," I said, "do you hear that?"

"What?"

"Henry, there are people here. They are playing bagpipes. You said no one ever came here in the fall. Henry, you were wrong! What are we gonna do? We've got to get out of here."

"Oh, man," Henry said, "are you serious, dude?"

"No," I said, "I'm making it up."

"Oh good," Henry said and lay back down on the bed.

"Henry," I yelled, "I'm not making it up."

Henry was quiet for awhile. He stood up and went to go check out the situation for himself. His back was covered with strange lines from sleeping on the springs. It looked like some kind of weird, inkless tattoo.

"Wow," Henry said, after a really long time, "that's some fucked-up shit."

"Tell me about it," I said.

"Listen," Henry said, "don't worry, I have a plan."

"You do?"

"Yeah," Henry said, "what we'll do is just go over to the University of Wisconsin and hook up with some hot chicks. They've got dorms. That's where they live. We'll just hook up with some of them and stay with them in the dorms. It'll be awesome. We probably should have done that in the first place. We'll find two of them, roommates. One for you and one for me. We'll tell them we're twenty or something. Don't worry, Brad, I've got everything under control."

We never made it to the girls' dorm. We didn't even get halfway there. To tell you the truth, I wasn't surprised in the least. Henry and I had just changed places a few minutes earlier so Henry was driving again, which was fine with me. I liked looking out the window at all the cornfields, and the cows, and the bushels of hay, which looked like huge snowballs made of dried grass. Seeing the same things over and over again eased my mind, soothed it. It was sort of like when I was little and we had this TV that didn't work so good. Sometimes all you could get on it was static, and when I was bored I'd watch it anyway and just sort of zone out and fall into the fuzz, like a blurry dream.

The reason Henry was driving was because Henry said I sucked at driving stick, which I had to admit was true. I never understood what the big deal was about stick. I never understood why it was supposedly cooler. You couldn't even drink a Coke or scratch your nose driving stick. I liked automatic 'cause

that way you always had the option of having one hand free. I never could get the hang of shifting smoothly like you're supposed to.

Henry said, "Brad, you idiot, you're fucking up the engine. My brother's gonna kill me."

"Fine," I said, "you drive."

And so at the next gas station we stopped and switched places. A few minutes later, we were eating barbeque-flavored Ruffles potato chips out of a bag between us when I saw the squad car in the rearview mirror on my side. Fuck, I thought.

"Henry," I said, "it's them."

"What?" Henry said, his mouth full of potato chips. Little bits of them flew in my face. I just stared at Henry and gave him a knowing look.

"What?" Henry said again, not understanding.

"The cops," I said. "Henry," I said, "you better pull over."

Henry looked in his mirror and kept driving. "What the fuck?" Henry said, "I wasn't even speeding."

"I don't think that's why they're pulling us over," I said. At this point the sirens were on. They were loud, insistent, like an alarm clock ringing and ringing when you're dead tired.

"Oh, come on, dude," Henry said. "We're all the way in Pecatonica. We're almost in Wisconsin. They don't know about the 7-Eleven."

Listening to Henry you'd have thought Pecatonica, Illinois, was China or Timbuktu.

"I think they know," I said. "I think," I said again, "that you better pull over. It'll be worse if you don't," I told him.

Henry pulled over. It seemed like we just stayed parked there on the side of the road forever. Now that the squad car was closer I could see that there was only one cop and he was talking on his radio. I thought maybe he was calling for backup.

"I wish the gun wasn't in the back," Henry said.

"I'm glad it is," I said. "Are you crazy?"

"There's no one around," Henry said. "If the gun was up here, I could just shoot him in the leg or something."

"Henry," I said, "you better just be glad that I am your friend because, man, Henry, if you did something like that . . . oh, Henry, you have no clue . . ."

The cop finally got out of the car and walked up to the truck. He was on the fat side and had a big nose. He looked a lot like Larry from the Three Stooges except without the curly hair. His was thin and straight, sort of

brownish red.

Henry rolled down the window. The cop just stared at us, didn't say a goddamn thing at first. Then he said, "You boys, you boys. You boys," he said, "are in a heap of trouble."

"What?" Henry said. "I wasn't speeding."

This made the cop laugh. He laughed so hard I thought he'd have a heart attack. This time Henry and I were the ones staring. His laughing, it was like a show of laughing. He was just choking with it. But then, just as soon as it had started, it was over and he was dead serious.

"Out of the car, boys," he said.

We both got out of the car and he read us our rights, just like on TV, the whole "right to remain silent" jazz. He handcuffed us and put us in the back of the squad car. I gave Henry a look like he better not say anything, and for probably the first time in Henry's whole life he didn't. The handcuffs hurt. They were tight and cold and dug into the bones of my wrists. I thought about that magician guy, Harry Houdini. I'd done a report on him in the seventh grade when I actually cared about stuff like school. The encyclopedia had said he was an escape artist, that he could get out of handcuffs, locked suitcases, anything. I started to wish I was him, but I knew I wasn't. No, I was no Harry Houdini. I was just one of two imbeciles going to juvie.

The cop stayed outside and we saw him take Henry's keys out of the ignition and go around to the back of Henry's brother's truck. He opened up the cap and took out the rifle. He flashed it at us, waved it in the air like he was in a military parade. It made me remember what we'd done and my heart sank in my chest. I reached out and tried to grab Henry's hand like a scared kid on a roller-coaster ride, but I remembered my hands were handcuffed and so they just rattled a little, like a ghost. Henry gave me a look that said he understood, that he was scared, too. Even though the cop was outside, we were still exercising our right to remain silent. You never knew, there could be a video camera or a tape recorder or something.

The cop took the rifle and some other stuff out of the truck, including Henry's skull bowl and even the jumper cables for the truck. We didn't steal those from the 7-Eleven. He should have known that they don't even sell jumper cables at 7-Eleven. I didn't think he cared. Maybe he had a pickup truck that needed jumper cables. He put all of it in the trunk of the squad car and then drove us a couple of miles away to this little building that was Pecatonica's poor excuse for a police station. We sat on these plastic chairs near this lady who was typing on this old computer at a desk. She had bifocals on



attached to a little chain. They swung in a "U" shape as she typed.

"Well, well, well," she said peering over her glasses when she saw us, "I see Sergeant Udell has tracked you down. What in God's name were you boys thinking? Robbing a 7-Eleven. My God."

I hung my head. I felt like such a dog. Everyone knew who we were.

Then she said, "Which of you boys is Brad?"

I looked up.

"I've phoned your mother, Brad. She's coming straight down, Brad. She wouldn't have it any other way. She'll be here in a couple of hours."

I couldn't believe my mom was coming.

While we were waiting for my mom to come, the Larry guy had some of the other cops come and take a look at us. When we'd first come we could hear them in the other room slapping him on the back and offering him congratulations for catching us. It felt weird to be somebody's catch. I pictured the cop holding me up like a huge fish, like in those pictures people bring back from fishing trips. Then I pictured myself dead and stuffed and hung on his wall. It made me feel queasy. I was glad I didn't throw up.

"Hell," said one of the cops looking over at us, "if you were my boys, I'd kill you."

When my mom came, she was a mess. And she didn't come alone. She brought Mike, her dumb boyfriend, with her. Jesus, I thought, what'd she have to go and bring him for? He kept rubbing my mom's back like it was a massage session or something. She was crying and biting her lip. I could see little tooth marks on it.

"Oh, Brad," she kept saying. "Why, Brad? Why?"

"I'm sorry, Mom," I blurted out.

Suddenly I felt like I was going to cry and I knew that wasn't an option.

My mom started screaming at Henry then, saying that she'd known he'd end up getting me in trouble from the start.

Henry, being the brilliant soul he is, said, "Mrs. Ames, how do you know it was us? Innocent until proven guilty. Ever hear of that?"

"Oh, you idiot boy," my mom said. She leaned into Mike for support like a wall.

A different cop came out and had my mom and Mike go into the other room with him. I guess they were going to find out what was going to happen to us before we were. They came out about fifteen minutes later. We were going to go to juvie. The plan was that the cop would drive Henry and me there, my mom would follow behind in her car, and Mike would drive Henry's

brother's truck behind her and eventually take it back to Elgin. My mom was going to find me a lawyer in the next couple of days. I wondered how Henry would get a lawyer. I wondered if his parents would even care. The lady at the desk asked if anyone was hungry, and even though we all shook our heads no, she ordered pizza from Domino's for us.

"Don't worry," she said when it came time, "the station will take care of it."

She gave one pizza to my mom, Mike, Henry, and me, and the other one got brought into where the cops were. We weren't allowed to take our handcuffs off so we ate our pizza with them on which felt strange. We had to kind of hold a piece with one hand, but the other hand would have to come with it for the ride. Even though no one was hungry, we ate the whole pizza. The lady at the desk had some, too. It was a sausage pizza. I wondered if the cops were having sausage, too. I remember thinking it would probably be the last pizza I'd have in quite a while.

In the car on the way to juvie, the cop kept saying, "Oh hoh, hoh, Juvie Junction. That's where you boys are headed. Juvie Junction." He said it was like we were going to Disney World or the fucking Taj Mahal. It pissed me off. He kept cracking his gum, too. It sounded like a cap gun. He knew we were screwed. And we knew it, too, screwed in the biggest way ever. But the strange thing was, as screwed as we were, I felt a little relieved. It was like now there was no reason to pretend everything was normal and good. I mean not that we'd ever pretended before, especially Henry, but now everything was out in the open. It felt like, I don't know, right somehow.

Henry fell asleep and his head leaned against the window, and I could smell sausage on his breath. I wondered if the cop had any kids. I felt real sorry for his kids, if he had any, because he was a real imbecile. I turned and looked out the rear window, and I could sort of make out the shape of my mom in the darkness. I could see the tiny red glow of her cigarette darting around in the dark like a little firefly. I realized then, looking at her and at the cop and at everything and nothing in that dark night, that I'm definitely not a man yet. In fact, I wondered if there even was such a thing as a man.

# Chicks

Joe Tower

NONE OF THE POPULAR KIDS WERE ON STUDENT COUNCIL, JUST THE PUNKS, the dorks, the hoods, the motorheads, one kid who was perpetually on crutches, the jerks, the sluts, a group of antiestablishment neointelligentsia who published an underground newspaper called *A Memo From the Desk of Jack Kerouac*, the druggies, the bookworms, the ravers, a girl who practiced Wicca, some Trekkies, and a group of surfer-wannabes who only listened to ska; the stolid, the inert, and the apathetic. Zelda was not one of these. And she made it look good.

I'd finally established a routine. Or what I thought was a routine, having been the new kid at Glen River High for only a month. It was hard for me to find a welcoming crowd amongst a bunch of guys who seemed to have an infinite number of neatly pressed Iron Maiden T-shirts. But then I found the waysiders, like Enzine and Buddha, my little pal Rocketship, and Zelda, who all helped make the disappointment of my recent move to their little town irrational.

Zelda found me with a prolonged stare in homeroom my second week of school. I somehow hadn't noticed her hiding behind some book I'm sure I'd never read before. Then, all of a sudden, she was there, a small-framed, olive-skinned hippie-chick in the back row with a patchwork skirt and old Chuck



Taylor sneakers that were tearing at the sole. She laughed a lot (the dressing on her personality salad) and had a pixie's smile around bright, white teeth. Her hair was a knotty nest of dreads, braids, and multi-colored strands that hung down in her face and over her ears, and one time, one of the hanging strands got wound up in her nose ring and she had to excuse herself and go to the bathroom to undo it. She was careful and delicate with her movements and her words, always sure to choose the right combination of wit and insight when she raised her small hand, consciously held in a little, cupped fist. It was really cute. She was always right; whenever she spoke, she was always right. She was something fresh when the only bastards who seemed to occupy the high school in Scitney, Iowa were pregnant chicks elected to the prom court and guys who worked at John Deere or a foundry on the East Side of town.

Whether or not I was in love with Zelda wasn't really certain at the time. She sparked something in me, though, that made me introduce myself to her during a pep rally while I was trying to play it cool carrying a Trapper Keeper. She spoke softly in conversation, as opposed to her classroom banter where she wasn't at all shy about making herself heard. We sat hip to hip during the rally, and I avoided talking about myself. I found out she was an artist, in more ways than one, having dabbled in music, poetry, painting, sculpting, and even interpretive movement performance, which she did every Wednesday night at Evil Twin Theatre downtown. I learned that she was an activist, a hateless, restless defender of social conscience, even as a senior in high school. Her voice of awareness was an instrument, a steady-but-cutting sound that people, even the small-minded trash with REO Speedwagon at full blast, took the time to listen to. She organized sit-ins and walk outs and stand ups and shut ups, and all-exhibiting other sorts of rebellious resourcefulness before most of the kids at our high school were aware of televised news programs. And she was funny. She was dirty funny, like my old man, and frequently used the word "cocksucker," even in front of teachers, which I found to be a particular turn on. She drove a VW van, listened to the Doors, and chain-smoked during gym class while other chicks practiced for the Glen River High Cheer Squad. She wore shirts with Che Guevara on them and beaded necklaces that she made out of slate and seashells. She moved like a dancer.

Our first "date" was sitting together in the bandstands at the first home football game of the year.

"Here," I had said. "I want you to have my Pez dispenser. It's Spider-Man." She smiled casually, took it out of my hands, and kind of rolled it around in her fingers, and her rings clicked and clacked against the plastic of the Pez dispenser

in rhythm to the school song, which the marching band was playing at the time. Then she laughed.

"Moody," she tilted back Spider-Man's head, "there isn't any Pez in here."

"That isn't the point," I said, looking at her with mock disapproval. "It's an expression of sentiment."

"Oh, I see," she laughed.

"Yeah," I said, "it's an *offering*." And we laughed again, and she took my hand in hers. We sat like that, holding hands—not just holding them, but with *interlocking fingers*—and didn't say a word for the rest of the game.

After the game we drove up to the local pizza parlor, the Pizza Hole, where all the kids went after the games. It was a windowless shack with gray aluminum siding and a neon sign that was missing the "a" in "pizza," and I was informed it had been like that for the last fifteen years. In a showcase of Midwestern country wit, everyone took to just calling it "The Piss Hole." It was on the border of a construction sight and a rock quarry, so at the end of the parking lot there were these huge rocks you could sit on. That's where Zelda and I sat, looking up at a cloudy night sky, asking stupid, repetitive questions, avoiding the real issue of the possibility of a relationship on the horizon.

"Why'd you move here?" she asked.

"My dad took a job teaching flying lessons," I said.

"What about your mom?"

"She's, uh . . . they're divorced. My mom still lives in the city."

"Oh," she said, "I'm sorry."

"Isn't your fault," I responded. "It was a mutual thing. Like a truce."

"A truce?" she asked.

"Yeah, like, they called a truce. They were like Bugs Bunny and Elmer Fudd," I said.

"Your parents' marriage was like a Warner Brothers cartoon?" she asked.

"Uh-huh," I responded. She looked confused. "See, Bugs Bunny just wants to frolic and joke and play, right?"

"Right," she said, apprehensively.

"Well, he doesn't really *want* to be hunted. Deep inside, though, he likes the companionship," I said. She still looked confused. "And Elmer . . . well, Elmer is just a hunter. He wants to hunt. And it doesn't matter if he's hunting a rabbit, a squirrel, or anything. He just has to hunt."

"So?" she asked.

"So, they just keep running around, hunting and being hunted, to amuse the audience. Well, if Bugs and Elmer came to their senses and said, 'This sucks.

You aren't a bad person, but I don't really need you. The audience doesn't really care. They aren't laughing anymore. Let's go our separate ways, no hard feelings,' that would be my parents," I said.

"Well," she laughed, nodding, "that's . . . great."

She looked at me and batted her short eyelashes a couple of times. Her mascara was smudged. I didn't tell her. She touched my fingers so lightly I could hardly feel it. I leaned forward and kissed her. It was a comfortable, shy, *first* kiss that I knew was perfect the moment it happened. Our lips snapped together and apart a couple of times, then we didn't move for a beat, while we both tried to decide what to do next. I lingered there for a while, at her mouth, and her hand moved onto my face, smoothing out my stubble with that same slight touch, and my cheek tingled as she tickled the skin, and when she combed her fingers through my hair we both pulled tighter into an embrace and then released, breathing heavy. She was smiling, and I thought that had to be a good sign. There was a party in my pants and I *knew* that was a good sign.

"I want a milk shake," she said, still smiling.

"Me, too," I responded.

Of course, that giddiness only lasted for a few months. When people spend as much time together as Zelda and I did, the giddiness quickly gives way to familiarity. It was a Wednesday night, and we were studying for our physics midterm and . . . well . . . she peed in front of me, to make a long story short. We were in the bathroom, and I was brushing my teeth or putting antiseptic on a new piercing or something, and she came in, dropped her shorts, and peed.

"What are you doing?" I asked.

"I'm going to the bathroom. What's it look like?"

"Well, it looks like you're going to the fucking bathroom," I said. "Why?"

"Cause I have to go. Duh," she said and gave me this eye-rolling, slack-jawed look that I hated *so much*. And she got on my nerves, which was a nagging feeling since it'd never really happened before. Needless to say, I immediately left the bathroom, to which her response was, "What's with you?"

"Duh," I said.

Anyway, we were going through that kind of period about the time that our school was hosting an area Valentine's Day dance. Zelda was on Student Council, so she was helping to organize it, and she spent the week decorating our gymnasium with cheap, catalog-ordered decorations made of plastic and pipe cleaners depicting Cupid in silly situations. I didn't get a chance to see her much until the day of the dance. To my surprise, her attitude had changed sharply. She had completely one-eightied. I must have, too, because she wasn't



irritating me at all. We were back to our silly, puppy-love, mocking, giggling ways, having fun and laughing loud enough for everyone to hear us. Things seemed better than they'd been, and that was exciting.

She had to be at the dance early, so I met her there. Besides, we were at a point—a point of *familiarity*—in our relationship that didn't require me to pick her up anymore. I showed up in my typical garb: a hooded sweatshirt; second-hand, twice-washed pants with a few stains; and "Mean Green" (a stellar, vintage, lime green bowling shirt I looked awesome in that had "Earl" embroidered over the left breast). She was dressed just as typically for her: stick thin, like the "after" picture for a diet campaign, in Janis Joplin's clothes and a tame feather boa, dreaded hair, and flip-flops she had bought at a county fair in Des Moines for thirty-two cents.

We picked a safe spot in the unlit privacy of our gym, away from the gratuitously sexual freshman couples and inebriated jock-star football pros getting in fights with their degenerate, slutty, white-trash girlfriends. We were still laughing, teasing, mocking as usual, picking out various couples in the darkness to emotionally torture in our own little fantasies. My lips brushed hers, and we kissed for a moment, a sweet, pleasant kiss like our first one outside the Pizza Hole when we'd started dating. Of course, we'd had many kisses since: sloppy drunken ones and deep tongue ones, insignificant cheek ones, and powerful honest ones. But it was that comfortable first one that maintained my affection for Zelda. I smiled.

"I brought some pot," I whispered.

"I have to tell you something," she whispered back.

"What?" I asked. But she didn't answer, only led me to the back door of the gym, outside the front stoop of our high school next to the handicap-accessible ramp. It was chilly outside, a shock to my body from the humidity of the gym. "Jesus. It's cold. Let's go get our coats."

"No, Moody. I have to tell you something *now*," she said.

"Wow," I said, "that sounds semiserious." She didn't laugh.

"Moody, don't joke," she said. I rubbed her arms to smooth out the goose bumps.

"OK, OK. You have my attention."

"Oh, my God," she sighed, looking at nothing, anywhere but at me. "I, um . . . you have to promise me you won't get mad."

"Fuck," I was overtaken by a warm feeling in my neck, "you're dumping me, aren't you?"

"No—my God—Moody, no way. Not at all," she cooed, caressing my cheek. "Not at all. But, I do have to tell you something . . . important. It's

important, OK? And I need you to promise me you'll keep an open mind."

"C'mon, Zel," I groaned. "What's going on?"

"So you promise?" she pressed, this time looking sincerely into my eyes.

"Yes!" I said, "I promise I'll keep an open mind."

"OK," she sighed again. "I . . . have come to certain . . . conclusions . . . about myself. They might be difficult for you to understand."

"Hey," I put my hands on her shoulders, "you can tell me."

She sighed again, "I know, Moody. Just listen, OK?"

"OK," I said, taking my hands away, "OK, I'm listening."

"I'm . . . bi . . . bisexual."

The thoughts and images that flashed through my brain at that moment ranged from sex, to lies, to love, to friendship, to anger, to fear, to sex, to lies, to fear, to her, to me, to the dance, and back to me.

"What the fuck does that mean?" I asked, deadpan.

"It means what I just said."

"You're bisexual?" I asked.

"I'm bisexual," she said.

"Wow," I responded, "you're bisexual. Am I just not doing it for you or what?"

"It's not like that at all, Moody. You promised you'd keep an open mind," she said.

"Oh, I am. I *am* open-minded. Your available market just doubled, that's what I'm open-minded about," I quipped, angrily.

"Moody," she shook her head, "please let me finish."

"There's more?" I asked. I was curious at that point.

"You know Velma Pratt?" she asked.

"The Goth chick?" I asked. "The one from the A/V club?"

"Yeah," she nodded. "Well, the other night, she and I got really drunk. We'd smoked a lot of pot, and we were just watching Letterman, or something, and studying for sociology, and . . ."

But I already knew the rest.

"Did you bang her?" I asked, looking at the ground.

"Jesus, Moody!" she yelled. "Fuck! I knew you'd be like this!"

"Like what?"

"Like a guy! Like you don't understand! That's so typical!"

"Bullshit," I laughed, "this is *not* typical. This is *anything* but typical. This is *atypical*, Zelda, that's what this is. I mean, shit, I thought this crap only happened in liberal arts colleges on the West Coast."

"Well," she cocked her head, "it just happened in Scritney, Iowa. How do

you like *that*?"

"Well, Zel, I don't, to tell you the God's honest truth. I think this fucking sucks. I think you cheated on me."

"I did not!" she contested.

"What do you mean, *you did not*? You engaged in a sexual act with someone that wasn't me!" I enunciated every word. "Is it automatically all right just because it was a chick? What is that to you, recess? Practice? Amateur recreation?" I steadily began backing away from her.

"Dammit, Moody, *please* don't walk away from me!" she yelled.

I got back in her face, "Fuck you, man! You dyke! What do you want me to say? 'Hey, Zel, want to go get a six-pack and go cruise for chicks?' Fuck you!"

"Oh, that's brilliant, Moody! Fucking brilliant!" She massaged her forehead with her fingers.

I stepped toward her, "Do you love her?"

"Oh, Moody, c'mon," she tried to put her hands on my chest. "Of course not. I love *you*. Try to be a little more understanding. I just did it for *me*. I had to. Does that make any sense? I love *you*."

"Well," I said, "this has been a great way to launch our relationship into that atmosphere, Zel. 'I love him, but maybe I should go do a girl to make sure.'"

"It wasn't like that," she said.

"Right, right." I started backing away again and said, deprecatingly, "It was something spiritual and existential, I'm sure. There was an emotional connection, right? It was something you had to do to satisfy the Sapphic urges that are in all women. I understand. Hey, Zel, maybe if you aren't too busy later on, you know, *fucking girls*, you could call me, and we could get back to our monogamous, heterosexual relationship."

"Moody! Wait!" she yelled behind me. I kept walking.

My car was pulling out of the school parking lot before she could stop me, and I got a wicked satisfaction out of watching her collapse and cry in the halogen lights of the school steps as I lit a joint, turned up some AC/DC, and careened into traffic like a man drunk with rage.

By the time I got home, however, I was just drunk on some premium Canadian whiskey that Dad had left in the trunk of the car.

"Have you been drinking?" he asked, sitting cross-legged in worn sweatpants and a T-shirt that said Harvard Law on it. He had been waiting up for me. I'm glad he was. It reminded me that he still cared.

"We're breaking up," I muttered. "Breaking up."

"Who?" asked my dad, laughing. "You and me? Good, son. I feel the need to see other people." He stood up, and I fell onto my knees, then rocked for-



ward right onto his hipbone. "Shit, Moody, you really did a number on yourself tonight, didn't you?"

"Uhhhhhhh," I moaned and fell back onto the floor.

"All right," my dad bent down and hoisted me onto my feet. He took me to our bathroom and dunked my head under the water faucet. In the kitchen he gave me a glass of ice and a slice of cheese on bread and sat me at our bar. He leaned back against the kitchen counter and kept laughing.

"What's this?" I asked, looking at the ice and cheese.

"Let the ice melt while you're eating the cheese. Perfect sobering combination. It'll stop you from getting sick. Just take it slow. I learned that during my party days," he said.

"Your *party days*? You mean last night?" I joked, nibbling some of the cheese.

He laughed, "Very funny. So who's breaking up?"

"I don't know," I mumbled, with my mouth on the glass of ice. "Zelda and I had a fight."

"Oh, I see. You mean your little steady?" he asked.

"Yeah, Dad," I snapped, snidely, "my *steady*."

"What?" he asked, defensively.

"Nothing. But maybe we could go down to the malt shop later and *sock-hop*," I mockingly responded.

"Shut up," he laughed, "Can't ever say anything cool for you, can I? I'm going to bed. Fend for yourself." He shuffled towards the stairs.

"Hey, c'mon, Dad," I yelled after him, "maybe we could go cruise the strip and do the hand jive." I laughed. Dad leaned over the railing.

"Hey, Moody?"

"Yeah, Dad?"

"Sleep in tomorrow," he said.

"Oh, I will," I said.

"And, Moody?"

"What?"

"Girls are complicated."

I sipped some water and chuckled, "Thanks, Dad. I know."

# Flying a Kite

Victor Yipp

“SO WHERE ARE YOUR PLAIN, PAPER KITES? YOU KNOW, THE DIAMOND-SHAPED ones with the two thin sticks that cross each other and . . . ?” Albert felt awkward asking this question. What other kinds of kites were there? When he was a kid that was the only kind of kite to fly.

From the moment he came into the small, narrow kite store he was disoriented. All those colors! All those shapes! Were these really kites? There were box-shaped kites, airplane-wing-shaped kites, butterfly-shaped kites. In reds and yellows and blues and greens. With cartoon characters or fancy designs on them. They were on the walls, they were hanging from the ceiling, they took up every single square inch of this narrow little store. He couldn’t believe that kids actually flew these things.

The kite store owner, a short, heavyset, older man with tinted sunglasses, looked like he made wooden Pinocchios as a hobby. He waved Albert off. “Oh, they don’t make those old kites anymore.”

Albert was indignant. “What do you mean, old? I used to fly those kites all the time, everyone did. You must have, too.”

“When you were a kid—forty, fifty years ago, right?” The man looked over his glasses and winked at him. It was a knowing wink, a wink shared by those

who know they are both getting up in years.

Albert was taken aback. Forty, fifty years ago? Fifty years was a half century. And a half century was a . . . a lifetime, almost. His shoulders drooped. He wasn't that old, was he? He was just sixty-two. Why was this old fart saying this, implying Albert was part of his generation? Hell, the old man had to be in his seventies. Albert wouldn't be that old for years. Eight years, anyway. He paused to consider it. Eight summers and eight winters. The years seemed to fly away so quickly. Suddenly eight years did not seem to be that long a time. Just as suddenly, he realized the old man's estimate was right on the money. It had been fifty years since he had flown a kite.

The store owner looked Albert up and down. Not many men his age came in to buy a kite. Usually he saw kids, or kids with their parents. For some reason, this guy looked troubled, lost. Confused. Maybe that was it. He must be getting a kite as a present for his grandkid. Hadn't even seen a kite in a half century. No wonder. "You remember those old kites?" Albert nodded his head up and down, smiling slightly. "Then you must remember how hard they were to fly sometimes, how you had to make a tail out of an old rag, how they tore so easily."

Albert grinned and shook his head. "I sure do. That was part of the fun, making them work, adjusting the tail, you know."

"Well, those days are gone, whether we like it or not. The kites they make now—" the owner waved his hand over the walls and ceiling of his store, "are made of plastic or Mylar, a stronger material. They're constructed so that they'll go up faster and easier, and stay in the air longer. Just like everything else nowadays. Technological improvements. A kid today wouldn't know what to do with those flimsy paper kites. He'd give up on the first try."

The old owner motioned Albert to follow him toward the back of the store. He pointed at a bat-shaped kite on the wall just above them, with Batman splashed over it in stunning colors. Looking at it made Albert dizzy. All those colors, the shapes of the other kites around the Batman kite. "This one is good for a beginner. I'm sure your grandchild will love this kite."

Albert shook his head, looking past the store owner. "No, no." He felt a little nervous. He wasn't about to admit how he was hung up on the recent death at the retirement home. "I don't have a grandchild. The truth is, I, I just felt like going out to fly a kite myself. It's a nice windy day, warm, you know, why not?" It didn't feel good to lie, especially to this store owner who didn't know him from Adam.

The owner smiled slyly and asked, "Aren't you kind of old to be flying a kite?"



He couldn't argue with that. The last time he had flown a kite was around fifty years ago with his dad. They had bought their kites at Woolworth's, the dime store where, once upon a time, everything did sell for a dime. The paper kites were in the back, piled in bins. They came in narrow paper packets, two thin wood strips wrapped around with kite paper, which had the thickness of tissue paper used to pack present boxes. (Easy to poke a hole in the tissue-thin paper while you crossed the two thin sticks.) You usually went through six or eight of these flimsy kites until you got the hang of handling them without poking holes in the paper.

"Well, I have some friends who never saw a kite being flown." He didn't want to say anything more on that subject. "Are you sure you haven't squirreled away any of those old paper kites, maybe in your back room?" He motioned toward the back of the store.

The old man laughed. "If I did have any, I certainly wouldn't be selling them. Those kites are probably worth something now."

Albert finally settled on a delta-wing-shaped kite made of plastic. Spider-Man had his arms spread all over the front of the kite, seemingly using it as a cape to swoop down on the criminals of Gotham City, or wherever this particular superhero plied his trade. He felt embarrassed toting it out to his car. He knew the old owner was looking at him through his plate-glass window, probably seeing George and Maggie in the Riviera, seeing Maggie grinning and waving at him out the back window.

He wasn't even sure why he was doing this. He did want to get away from the home. Just thinking of Brooks, the guy in the room next to him, dying the other night still made him shiver. He was puzzled. Why should it bother him? After all, this was a retirement home, and the residents were on average, over eighty, from what he was told at the open house. On occasion, in a place like this, there were bound to be deaths. But logic now defied him. A retirement home was a final resting home. No one moves out of a retirement home. You are carried out on a stretcher, feet first. Everyone here is in the final years of his or her life. Not much to look forward to.

And he didn't particularly want George and Maggie flying a kite with him, hanging out with him. He was stuck with them, though, at least for today. At breakfast he had mentioned the idea of going on a day trip, getting away from the home. What he was thinking about was a day at the casino, or visiting Jack and the guys. Maybe he could get a poker game going. That would have taken his mind away from what had happened the other night. But then Maggie blurted out, "It's such a nice windy day today. Let's go fly a kite." Before he had

a chance to even think about it, he shrugged his shoulders and said, "Sure, why not?" But he wasn't sure, a moment later, once the image of kite flying flashed before his mind. There was a bad memory there. Kite flying was not a joyful activity during his childhood. Because of his father. He didn't want to think about it. That was a long time ago.

And what a hell of a time they had getting George into his car that morning.

This was the first time they had seen his car. They were walking along the path next to the driveway in front of the retirement home. Albert had parked his car at the end of the driveway to make it easier for his fellow retirees to get to it. Now it stood there, before them, gleaming in the morning sun.

"Oh, Albert, what a beautiful car," Maggie gushed.

He felt good hearing that. "It's a 1966 Buick Riviera," he said. "I bought it new and have kept it ever since. But I'm going to sell it. I don't need it anymore. Certainly not at this place." He turned slightly and waved his hand at the retirement home behind him.

She raised her voice. "No, no! You mustn't get rid of it. It's so beautiful, so elegant. You'll never see them make cars like this anymore." She sidled next to the car, admiring its roofline. He nodded gravely but didn't say anything.

George spun past them and stopped in front of the Riviera. He shook his head and turned, derision spilling from his voice. "How the hell do you expect me to get in your car? I thought you had a van or something, not some muscle car from the sixties."

Albert had to smile. "Yep. You remember these cars."

George shrugged. He wasn't impressed. "But I can't get into it. What the hell good is it if I can't get into it?" He slammed his fists down on the arms of his wheelchair. "You forgot about this, cowboy?"

He started backing away from them, but Albert held up his hand. "I know how we can do it, George. Look." He walked over to the passenger side and opened the door. "Come over here," he said and he motioned George over.

George shook his head, then slowly moved his chair to where Albert was standing. Maggie followed him.

"Here, just turn and line yourself up next to my front seat. See, your seat is the same height as my car seat. Now, doesn't this fold up?" He tapped the armrest.

George looked down. "Yeah? So what?"

"Well, we just lift your armrest up, then I can help you slide right into my front seat. No problem."

"Oh, George, I wouldn't pass up a chance to ride in this car," Maggie said.

"Who asked you, crazy lady? Get out of my way." George waved them off. "I can pull myself in." His forearms were thick. This was obviously not the first time he had done something like this, Albert thought, as George reached out, put his left hand on the seat back and his right on the front edge of the seat, and dragged himself over and onto the front seat. He stared back at Albert, who closed the passenger door.

Maggie bumped up to the door and raised her finger, teasing him. "Shame on you, George, fooling us all this time."

He ignored her, turning his attention to Albert, who stood behind Maggie. "Guess what, pal? What are you going to do with my wheelchair?" He craned his neck to look at the backseat. "I ain't going anywhere without it."

"You haven't seen my trunk, George," Albert replied. "I can put a tank in that trunk. Probably like the tank you drove in World War II." He looked at George's wheelchair. "Hey, doesn't the back fold down? I'll pop it right into the trunk."

Maggie clapped her hands. "Ooh, goodie. Let me in and let's go fly that kite, boys."

George waved them off. "All right, all right. Let's go and fly your goddamn kite."

So there they were in his old 1966 Buick Riviera, the ancient muscle car that now carried a brand spanking new plastic kite, all headed for the lakeshore, a weird kite-flying crew if you ever saw one, consisting of an eighty-something-year-old woman with a walker, a similarly aged man in a wheelchair, and Albert, the only able-bodied person in the bunch. He still had not placed another ad to sell the car. Maybe he did love it too much to sell it. That thought did occur to him, before he suppressed it with the usual rational arguments: he didn't need a car, the home was near the commuter train stations; they had a van to take you to the usual places, like shopping or to the casinos; he had friends like Jack who could give him a lift.

The kite was spinning down, out of control. Albert tugged it, jerked it to get the kite away from the downdraft. "Come on, get up, get up!" he pleaded, wondering why the hell he let himself be talked into this. Just before it was about to hit the water, a wisp of wind came to the rescue, attaching itself to the bottom of the kite, stabilizing it, unspinning it. Albert pulled, this time a little more gently, letting the wind grab hold, letting it take over. He guided the kite upward, giving it more line. A smile crossed his lips. He still had the knack for flying these things. Maybe it was like swimming, you never lose your ability to fly a kite once you've learned it. An image of his father crossed his mind. He shook his head, erasing it.



"Get it higher, Albert, get it higher." Maggie's hands were gripping her walker. Then she was gripping his arm. Her spidery hand was a vise; he had to shake his arm to let her know he needed some space to maneuver the kite. Her eyes beamed, radared onto the kite, seemingly willing it up, up, up into the darkening sky. Albert loosened his hold on the line, gradually letting out more. Actually you could say the kite pulled itself up, out, helping itself to more line as needed. These kites were much easier to fly, he thought, they practically fly themselves. The old guy at the kite store was right. "Yes," he said, "higher, higher." He felt like he was a kid again, letting out the line, seeing the kite flying away from him.

But it wasn't right, it being so easy to fly a kite. The old guy was wrong. You needed a plain paper kite with a rag tail. You needed to learn the basics of really flying a kite, getting a feel for the eddies in the wind, managing the lift in the kite, recovering when the kite was going south. When you knew these things and you executed them right, when you could get a kite high up there—and keep it up as long as you wanted—then you really accomplished something. You could feel proud of yourself. Proud. When was the last time he felt any pride in himself? What he ought to do is make a kite. They can't be hard to construct, thin paper, sticks, and some glue. What more can you need? That's why they were so cheap when he was kid.

Albert, Maggie, and George were on the cement walk along Lake Michigan, on the wide curve of walk just before Museum Campus, with the major Chicago museums, the Adler Planetarium, Shedd Aquarium, and Field Museum of Natural History on their right, gigantic observers to the senior kite-flying trio. It turned out to be a great day for kite flying, the wind coming from the west and blowing over Lake Michigan. But after a few minutes, the strong winds also brought clouds with them, dark, cumulus clouds, heavy with water.

They made quite a sight, the three of them, escapees from the Claridge Home for Active Retirees. George was revving up his new electric-powered wheelchair, zipping it along the walk parallel to the shore, stopping about twenty feet away from Albert and Maggie. Then he spun around, revving it up again, speeding toward the two of them, stopping on a dime in front of Albert. He jerked his head in Maggie's direction. "Why did you listen to that old bag anyway?" Albert didn't know. "You goddamn pulled me away from my bingo game to see this? We're probably going to get soaked and I'll get goddamn pneumonia and probably die and it'll be all on your goddamn head. Both of you. I hope you're happy, goddammit." With that he spun around and sped away from them.

Maggie was unfazed by his remark. "He enjoys being here," she said, leaning her shoulder against Albert. "He just doesn't want to admit it."

Albert's arms were tiring. But he felt good. He had no worries, no concerns. No work problems. No one was looking over his shoulder, making sure he met his project deadlines. The air was crisp, cool for mid-August. He felt a hint of dampness on his forearms, a hint of the rain that was coming their way. The kite mesmerized him, standing up there, buffeted by the winds, Spider-Man staring down at them, threatening to break away and soar into the clouds.

Maggie read his mind. "Don't you love how kites just go so free, picking up on the wind, having a life of their own?" She wasn't looking at him. She was staring at the kite, now some two-hundred feet up in the air. And that is what it was doing, pulling Albert's arm left, right, up, down, it didn't care about him anymore.

Memory pulled at him as well. He couldn't stop it this time.

He was around eight or nine, out in the forest preserve with his father. They were in a clearing, a meadow. His father was a tall man, square-jawed, heavyset, instructing him on how to fly a kite. Albert remembered it as if it was yesterday. His father's voice was commanding. It left no margin for error, especially any by his one and only son. "The first thing you must do is figure out where the wind is coming from," his father told him. The sun glared behind his father's head, making him seem like a god. "Wet your finger and put it up into the air. That's right, just like that. Now place your kite on the ground where it will be picked up by the wind, face down, with just the cross sticks showing. OK. Let's let out some line, about twenty, thirty feet or so. Fine. Now, check the wind again. Look, it's picking up. You got both your hands on the line? OK. Now lift the kite. Just pull your hand up."

Albert hesitated. He had been afraid to make a mistake. After every instruction his father gave him, he had to stop what he was doing, absorb what his father said, and decide what to do that would not make his father mad at him. His father was such a taskmaster. Hesitation was disaster. What did twenty feet mean? How could he tell how much that was? "No, no!" His father barked. "You waited too long. The wind's died down. Look." The kite flipped over and slowly drifted to earth. "Here, let me have it." His father grabbed the line from him. He jerked it up, once, twice, three times, as if he were operating a water pump, then twisted his wrist, flipping the kite right side up again. It was magic to Albert. He would never be able to do this. "OK. I fixed it for you. Do you think you can handle it now?" He knew his father's eyes were boring in on

him, even though he did not look up.

His hands were on the kite again. "Slowly now, let the wind take over." He didn't know what that meant. How do you tell when the wind takes over? But he couldn't ask his father. He never asked his father. He only tried to please him. And that never worked. "There. The wind's catching it. Feel it tugging at you? Now let out some line. Just loosen your grip, the wind will pull the string out. Come on, come on, son. You're too damn slow, the kite's spinning out of control again. You can't dillydally at times like this, you gotta just do it." It was no use. His father slapped him on the side of the head and grabbed the line. "You're a goddamn mouse, Albert. You know that?" He watched as his father moved his arm up, down, right, left, letting out line until the kite was soaring into the sky, a red diamond against the clear blue. "Here!" His father handed the line to him. Albert put his hands behind him. He looked down at the ground. His father knelt down, eye-to-eye with him. He grabbed Albert's chin with his thumb and forefinger and pushed up. "No son of mine is a quitter. You hear that?"

Albert listened. Eventually he learned how to fly a kite. But he hated kite flying from then on.

He heard the crackle of thunder. Darker clouds were moving in from the western suburbs of Chicago. They'd have to be going soon. The sky was darkening. He reeled in the line. "No, Albert." Maggie's hand was on his. Her fingers were thin, spidery, cool. "Let it go. Let it fly. Haven't you ever felt like a kite, soaring in the air, picked up by the winds, free to go wherever you want?" She looked at him, her eyes beaming, radaring into his, willing him.

Albert was free. He wasn't flying a kite anymore. He was in the kite. He was the kite, pulling away from those people down on the lakeshore. They were specks, George a little Hot Wheels car buzzing back and forth next to the lake, Albert and Maggie close together, holding onto the kite, she holding onto him. He didn't need them anymore. He didn't need his father anymore. The wind pulled him, pulled him, pulled him back into the sky, into where he was supposed to be. Free. The damp wind chilled him, thrilled him. This was what it was like to be free. There. He saw the end of the line trailing in the wind, cutting him off from the world. He looked down. Two spots glowed at him. Her eyes.

Then he was back in himself. The loose kite string fluttered in front of him, then the wind caught it, swooping it up, away from them. "Shit. I let go of the line." How the hell did that happen, he thought. I never let go of a kite.

Maggie's hand was still on his. He looked at her. She didn't look good.



Maggie felt a tug in her chest. It was more insistent this time, tugging at her from somewhere inside, pulling at her lungs, her throat, her mouth, pulling everything inside of her, as if her whole body was being sucked in by a high-power vacuum cleaner somewhere in the pit of her stomach. She pressed her lips together. Please. Just a little more time. Please.

“You OK?” Albert looked at her face. All the color had gone from it. Her mouth was a straight line, her lips—where were they? They just disappeared. Her hands were frozen to her walker.

# First Bath

Lila Nagarajan

THEY HAD BEEN HOME FROM THE HOSPITAL FOR FIVE DAYS AND KRISHNA HAD yet to sleep more than forty-five minutes at a time. They had tried all the age-old superstitions: put an antique key under the baby's crib, tickle his back with a branch of neem leaves, massage his toes with the softest part of your palm, and sing only lullabies about mangoes. Nothing had worked.

He was a hungry baby, and Sandra's nipples burned from feeding him all the time. Her eyes were heavy from sleeplessness, and her arms ached from carrying and rocking her baby boy all through the night. Sanjay helped with what he could, but the baby wanted his mother and only his mother. Sanjay's touch did not soothe him.

There were many pressing details to be seen to upon arriving back in Kovilpatti from the hospital. The baby was officially named on an auspicious evening the day after their return. Following tradition, all of Sandra's old saris were given to the servants and laborers; Dhanushini bought her new ones. Krishna had to have his First Bath, and it had to be planned to the last, smallest detail: find the auspicious hour on an auspicious day, buy the sandalwood paste, make sure the jasmine flowers (picked fresh on the auspicious morning) were delivered without delay, decide what to serve at the celebration feast, and tell

Vallamma the Bather to cancel all prior engagements. Dhanushini took most of this planning upon herself, leaving Sandra and Sanjay to figure out the workings of parenthood—how to tie the cloth diapers, that they needed to burp Krishna every time he was fed, what made him stop crying and what made it worse. They clutched at their forty-five minutes of sleep with tight knuckles, like their lives depended on it.

A highly respected Poojari looked at Krishna's stars and the barely visible lines on the baby's palm before he set the date for the First Bath. The priest declared that the ceremony must be held on the blessed final Friday of the month of July. And on the night before this blessed day, after tending to all the last-minute details, Dhanushini told Sandra, "You must be bathed and ready to bring Krishna downstairs tomorrow morning at six-thirty. It is very, *very* important that you are not late. The ceremony *must* be completed by eight o'clock, at the latest."

They stood at the foot of the stairs, Sandra, tired and sagging, while Dhanushini buzzed with excitement and energy. Sandra just wanted to go upstairs to bed for a few hours; Sanjay could stay up with Krishna. She promised to set her alarm. She had set the alarm for five o'clock and was still awake when it went off. Krishna had fussed and cried all night long. She fed him, took turns with Sanjay carrying him, rocking him, and singing songs about mangoes to him. At five-thirty, Sanjay left for the office, freshly showered and smelling nice (unlike Sandra, who smelled of milk and baby burp-ups). Krishna finally quieted down around five forty-five, and Sandra put him in his crib and leaned back onto her bed. She just wanted to close her eyes for a minute or two. She had time.

At seven-thirty, Dhanushini lost her patience. She spent an hour waiting for Sandra, thinking that her daughter-in-law might need a little extra time getting Krishna and herself ready for the ceremony. "It is Sandra's first child, after all," Dhanushini told her cousin, Kanmani, "We must be patient with her." Twenty women relatives gathered in the living room for the occasion, dressed in their loudest, sparkliest, most expensive saris. As minutes ticked into an hour, the saris grew heavy on their waists, and earlobes stretched with thick gold earrings. Dhanushini told the women to fill the new brass bucket with warm water scented with jasmine petals and set everything up outside in the courtyard. She told them that the little baby Krishna, just home from the hospital five days before, would be down in a few minutes.

The women chattered with excitement. They wanted to see this baby whose birth was such a miracle. They wanted to examine his mix of brown and



white and see how it had turned out. Sandra was an hour late and they wanted to know why.

Dhanushini climbed up the stairs thinking, *Doesn't the American girl know the importance of the First Bath?* Hadn't Dhanushini stressed the importance of auspicious timing? She sighed and rolled her shoulders, letting some tension off them before approaching the bedroom. She quietly turned the door handle and pushed the door open. It creaked, announcing her entrance into Sandra and Sanjay's room.

The room was still, not even a breeze ruffling the soft blue curtains Sandra had hung over the windows. Dhanushini allowed her eyes to roam over the room, the dusty vanity next to the closed bathroom door, piled with Sandra's make-up and nail polish and other beauty supplies she had no time to use anymore, the two ancient teak closets that stood on either side of Sanjay's desk under the wall of windows. Dhanushini decided that no matter what Sandra said, it was time for the maid to come up and fold all their clothes and put them neatly away inside their closets. Months ago Sandra insisted on doing this herself, but lately clothes were starting to pile up. The clotheshorse had Sanjay's underwear draped over them, his *lungis*, a shirt, a pair of pants, socks piled up underneath, and three or four saris just thrown over everything.

Sandra was asleep on her stomach, with both arms crooked under her face and the cotton bedsheets wrapped around her bare legs. She slept in nightshirts that made Dhanushini cringe in embarrassment for the girl. It was unbecoming of a young woman, especially a mother, to expose so much skin. And such *pale* skin at that! The thin layer of blonde hair covering Sandra's legs shone golden in the spots of sunlight that poked through spaces between the curtains. Her toenails were painted pale pink, and the anklet she refused to take off even when her ankles had been so swollen during pregnancy rested on her left heel.

Krishna lay on his back in the crib next to Sandra's side of the bed. His eyes were open, watching the slow spinning of the ceiling fan, until Dhanushini leaned over him smiling. She reached under him and scooped him up into her arms, holding him against her chest for a moment, letting him feel her heartbeat, letting him recognize her, so he wouldn't cry and wake Sandra up.

Dhanushini kissed Krishna's forehead and decided that she would take him downstairs without waking Sandra. She would show her grandson off to the whole village. He had long eyelashes, the kind that would make women jealous when he grew enough strength in his legs to walk. His hair was as black as night and his skin so golden, like milk and soil mixed to perfection. Not brown and white, not Indian and American. Sandra and Sanjay did not make this baby,

Dhanushini decided. God made this baby with a handful of fresh cow's milk and a handful of fertile soil. There was no other explanation for the miracle of his birth.

Making her way downstairs, Dhanushini held the baby so close that her lips almost rested on his ear while she whispered to him.

"We will take good care of you. We will fill your stomach with goat's milk and liver, with the freshest fruit juices and the sweetest mountain water. We will make you laugh; you have cried too much already, my little infant Krishna."

As they entered the downstairs living room, Dhanushini stopped speaking. She could hear the voices of the relatives coming to them from the courtyard. She turned left and walked down the hall towards them, having second thoughts: *Maybe I should have woken Sandra. I told her three or four times last night to be ready by six-thirty at the latest. I will be Krishna's second mother; who else will teach him about his heritage? She held the baby in so long he almost died!*

In her heart, Dhanushini believed that she had earned the right to bathe her grandson.

Twenty-three years ago, her mother-in-law took Sanjay from her arms and denied her the right to bathe her own son. Sanjay had a little golden bathtub for his First Bath, with red pomegranate seeds that looked like rubies floating in the water. The room smelled like fruits, bananas and oranges and mon-gostines, and of sandalwood from sticks of incense burning in every corner. The gold tub shone brightly against the cold mosaic floor. Her father-in-law sat tall in his rosewood chair at the head of the room, his long, white hair twisted neatly into a bun. The large diamond stud in his ear sparkled with sunlight, making him look like a king, and no one could stop gasping for air at the mere sight of him. He was a tall man, six foot five, with wide, thick shoulders that carried the strength of a bull in them. He saved his smiles and soft words for his grandson and pretty women who harvested the coffee on his estates.

Dhanushini was about to place Sanjay in the tub when her mother-in-law swept into the room, a haze of green sari and bunches of white jasmine garlands strung through her hair. She was only a little shorter than her husband, but her presence swallowed the room. Her laughter, harsh and pointed, sucked up all the air between the walls and left Dhanushini gasping for breath, tears stinging her eyes. Dhanushini could not fight back when her mother-in-law took Sanjay out of her arms and said, "I will bathe Sanjay, and you make sure the mutton is cooked until it's tender! I don't trust this new cook of ours."

Dhanushini wanted to throw herself at her mother-in-law's chest, knock her over, and scream, "He is MY son and I will bathe him!"

But instead, she let the boy slip out of her embrace and into his grandmother's.

Krishna pressed his soft face into his grandmother's neck. He liked the sound of her voice. For a premature baby, Krishna had extremely round cheeks and glowing skin. He did not have the pale, pasty, and wrinkled skin of most newborns. Everyone had been surprised when the doctors said he could go home so soon after his birth. In the village, people said special prayers for him; he was their miracle, and they told his story over and over again to their children and grandchildren.

When Dhanushini and Krishna slipped out of the hall and into the sunshine, Krishna closed his eyes and the relatives cooed over him like a flock of pigeons. They flapped their colorful saris around him and tried to touch his hair and his toes, but Dhanushini quietly shooed them all away, reminding them that it was almost eight o'clock and promising that they could hold him when the bath was done.

Already brightly lighting up the clear blue sky, even at seven-thirty in the morning, the sun kept the courtyard warm. Villagers riding on bicycles stopped to watch the ceremony from across the street. Vendors carrying wire baskets holding brimming tumblers of coffee ceased their *capee capee* chant to observe Krishna's first bath. Women who went from house to house collecting clothes to be washed dropped the heavy bundles from their heads onto the ground and took a moment of rest. Most children were in school already. These people stood across the dusty street and did not sparkle like Anachi's family. They watched through quicker eyes and smiled with faces accustomed to hardship. The line and shape of the villagers was tougher than those of the rounded, softer women in the courtyard.

When Krishna's aunts and cousins lowered themselves onto the gymkhana spread over the ground, Dhanushini held the baby out to Vallamma, the Bather, who sat on a stool in the middle of all the relatives. The old woman's sari was hitched up high above her knees, almost to her waist, and her legs shone brown and strong, more like a young boy's than an old woman's. Gold studs ran all the way up her ears like shiny ants, and a thick stud pierced her wide nose. Vallamma was the only woman allowed to show her legs like this in such a public place. Her job was to wash people who were unable to wash themselves, and she made a good living doing this. She was called to Anachi's house to give the baby his First Bath. It surprised Vallamma that the baby's mother was not present, but she did not express her concern because she was paid to give baths, not to ask questions.

Vallamma first held the baby up in her lap while Dhanushini removed his



little cloth diapers. When he was naked, she laid him against her bare, outstretched legs. Then she dipped a brand-new brass mug into the bucket of water that had jasmine petals floating in it. It was cool and fresh and sweet smelling. She poured the lightly heated water over the baby and was not surprised when he did not cry. She knew that newborns liked baths because they felt safe.

If Krishna could see clearly through his still-blurred, six-day-old eyes, he would not feel safe. The skin on Vallamma's arms and neck was wrinkled like ancient onionskin and her eyes were cold like the belly of a fish. Her toenails were talons caked in dirt, and her hair sat on top of her head in tangles and clumps of black and gray. But he did not see these things. He felt only the breath of his grandmother's words in his ears and liquid that sounded like satin poured over his skin.

Vallamma dipped the brass mug into the jasmine-scented water a second time and rubbed the baby's stomach with one hand while pouring water with the other. Then she took a handful of sandalwood paste from a bowl next to her and massaged the sweet-smelling paste into his skin with both hands. She covered him in the brownish yellow paste from neck to toes and then turned him over so that his face pressed into her legs. Still, he did not cry, and Vallamma foresaw that he would grow to be a patient man. *He must have his mother's temperament*, she told herself. She would never say this aloud because she, like everyone else in the village, knew that Anachi's family would rather not acknowledge Krishna's mother at all. She massaged sandalwood paste into his tiny shoulders and back, into the bottoms of his feet.

Dhanushini stood next to Vallamma the whole time. She laughed with relatives about how pink Krishna's feet were.

"Just like his daddy when he was a baby!" she said. "When Sanjay began to walk, I made him always wear socks and shoes, so his feet would always stay fair."

Certain relatives remembered Sanjay's birth, and they remembered Dhanushini's obsession with his fair feet. They remembered how Sanjay used to beg to wear sandals to school like all of his classmates. He was not allowed to run in the house barefoot but was forced to wear *chapels* made from expensive leather. To this day the soles of Sanjay's feet were soft, uncalled, and pink.

All the women gathered in the courtyard tapped their fingers on the ground, *One and two and three and four. Five and six and seven and eight and nine and ten.*

Vallamma filled the mug with water and poured it over Krishna's back, taking care not to let any water slip into his nose or mouth. Then she turned

him over and rinsed the sandalwood paste off his front. A grown man can spend all afternoon covered in sandalwood paste. He can let it sink into his skin and soak for hours, and when he washes it off he will emerge from his bath waters with the skin of a newborn baby, soft and fragrant. A baby, who already has tender skin, must have the paste washed off him by the count of ten, or his skin is likely to turn into liquid.

There is a legend about a North Indian boy named Varun who came to lose his physical form. Varun was considered a great miracle because this family had only one other child, an eight-year-old girl named Tinku Jane. They waited eight years for the boy to arrive. It is said that North Indians are easily distracted—by fruits and loud Hindi songs, by rich clothes and big cars, and by little girls with long, shiny hair. So when the morning for Varun's First Bath arrived, the servant girl, who was from the South, told the baby's Amma about the sandalwood. She told them that it was very important, more important than anything else at all, to clean the sandalwood from the baby by the count of ten.

The baby's Amma made the first mistake by placing her baby into a *tub* full of sandalwood paste!—a tub because they were trying to show off their wealth.

Now, at this point, the servant girl from the South was sent to the market to buy the morning's first vegetables for the feast that would follow the baby's bath. Before she left, she told her mistress, "You must remember to pull little baby out of the tub by the count of ten!"

For years, the large North Indian family would blame the poor mango vendor for what happened next. And the mango vendor would cry and say that he was sorry but was only trying to make a living. In their hearts, everyone knew. What happened next was the fault of Varun's mother's love of mangoes.

She put the baby into the tub, whispering all the right prayers. She even had her first child, Tinku Jane, slowly count out loud, but she did not tell the poor child why. So, Tinku Jane sat next to the tub of sandalwood and watched her little brother lie in it. She thought he looked like a doll and wanted to ask her mother when she could hold him and push him in her doll swing. Instead, because she was an obedient little girl, she began to count.

*One and two and three and four and five.*

Tinku Jane continued counting even when her mother saw the mango vendor and shrieked like a parrot. Forgetting her prayers, the mother ran to the front door where the mango vendor stood. He balanced a basket filled with the ripest, juiciest, most orange mangoes you've ever seen on top of his head.

*Seven and eight and nine,* Tinku Jane whispered under her breath, still focused on her little brother who looked like a doll.

*Ten.* Tinku Jane, unable to hold back any longer, poked a skinny finger into the tub of sandalwood paste to touch her brother's foot. He looked so soft. Softer than any of her dolls, who had stiff white limbs and blue eyes that rolled around in their sockets like a lunatic's. Her finger sunk into Varun's flesh. It sunk past the first knuckle, and then the second.

Tinku Jane stuck her whole hand into the tub and squeezed her baby brother. His leg oozed between her fingers like wet mud. She got on her knees and bent over the tub. She used both hands to squish her baby brother the way the cook squished dough to make *naan*. He was soft and squishy like dough. The girl was up to her elbows in sandalwood paste before her mother came back to the tub with a mango in her hand. But by then it was too late, he was just a puddle of fragrant paste.

Vallamma did not trust any one person to count for her. She let the whole family join in, but also whispered the numbers to herself, and she never waited until the count of ten. At nine and a half she would rinse the baby, and not a moment after.

Dhanushini picked newly bathed Krishna from Vallamma's legs and wrapped him in a white cotton towel. Because a baby's skin is still tender at six days, she allowed the towel to soak the wetness from Krishna's skin, rather than rub him dry. She took him to a spot of sunlight and sat cross-legged on the ground with the rest of the relatives and waited for Vallamma to bring the charcoal to Dhanushini.

In moments, Vallamma held the pinky-sized charcoal out to Dhanushini and said, "You must make the third eye. It will keep him safe."

Dhanushini did not argue—she began to make Krishna's third eye by drawing a perfect circle right between his eyes. Then she colored it in. When Sanjay's First Bath was over, her father-in-law had said "no" to the third eye. He said it was a superstition and that superstitious people were stupid people, there was no such thing as "evil," and that no one would wish "evil" upon his grandson. No one would dare, because he would kill them. Sanjay had suffered for it ever since. He had health problems, a terrible relationship with his father, and a deep sadness that had nestled itself into his heart and stayed there.

Upstairs, Sandra rolled onto her side and opened her eyes. Sometimes, when Krishna lay in his crib all quiet, she liked to watch him through the spaces in the wood. It still amazed her that she had brought Krishna into the world. Sandra strained to see him through the cracks and jerked completely awake when she realized his crib was empty. His light cotton sheet was gone and he was gone. And even though she hadn't quite recovered from his trau-



matic entrance into the world—him pushing to get out while she clenched her insides shut to keep him in as long as she could—she leapt out of the bed and ran down the first set of stairs and then the next, taking two steps at a time, from the third floor to the first yelling, “*Athai!* Where is Krishna? Do you have him?” Her eyes were wild, stretched out and frantic, and her mouth formed a wide hole in her face.

On the first floor, she heard lots of voices and saw the sun pouring through the front hallway. Suddenly, she remembered the First Bath and felt nervous and furious at the same time. Had they given him his bath already? She ran through the hallway to the voices and did not care that she was only in her nightshirt and that her heavy boobs were flopping around like melons in a bag. She didn’t care if people saw her this way; she needed to find Krishna. Her eyes stayed wide even as she stopped yelling to pull her lips into her mouth in a tight bite.

When Sandra burst into the blinding sunlight, it took her a moment to see her son. He was about ten feet from her, lying in Dhanushini’s lap with a huge black spot on his forehead. He looked hideous. Sandra could not see his nose or eyes or lips because the charcoal circle was so large.

Sandra screamed, “What do you think you are doing?” and rushed across the courtyard, boobs swinging in front of every woman in Kovilpatti village, to rescue her baby. Not waiting for an answer, she bent down and grabbed Krishna from Dhanushini’s lap. “What is this? What did you put on his face? What are you trying to do to my baby?”

An English-speaking relative tried to explain to Sandra that it was the third eye and that it was a good thing, a custom to ward off evil. Sandra did not care. She licked her thumb and rubbed it against the charcoal, only making it spread. Krishna looked deformed with the smear of black all across his forehead, like all of his pigmentation had not made it out of Sandra’s belly. Her eyes filled with tears. She couldn’t even look at Dhanushini because she wanted to attack the woman. How could they bathe Krishna without her being there?

Sandra shrugged off someone’s hand, a palm patting her back, trying to calm her. “I don’t want to be disturbed today,” she told the gathering. “Just leave us alone.” And she walked away, looking less angry than defeated.

Vallamma was the first person in the courtyard to move after Sandra left. She slowly rose to her feet and carried the still half-full bucket of water to the cowshed and dumped it around the cows’ stomping feet. It would help to keep them cool. The rest of the relatives gathered up their shock at Sandra’s appearance and behavior. They picked up their baskets and hankies and left Anachi’s courtyard in groups of five or six. The villagers rode off on bicycles or walked

to where they were headed before the baby's First Bath sidetracked them.

Dhanushini wanted to lie down in her room. She felt tired and needed to think. She wanted to be indignant, say that Sandra was disrespectful and out of line, but truth be told, Dhanushini completely understood and even applauded Sandra's actions. Dhanushini had overstepped a boundary, and she knew it.

The clock in the village center showed nine o'clock. The relative coolness of the morning receded like an ocean tide, leaving behind a sticky humidity that clung to each villager's arms and back and cleavage. Horseflies found mounds of dung to rest on, and dogs slunk off into corners of shade away from the all-consuming heat of the day. By noontime, one baby would die from dehydration, and clusters of women would sit like so many statues except for hands waving fans made of palm fronds to shake up the air in front of them. Men would throw their sweat-drenched head towels to the ground and curse their lot in life, that they had to toil under the angry sun's gaze while the people in Anachi's house sat under high-speed fans and drank tumblers full of refreshing buttermilk or lime juice.

Inside Anachi's house, the electricity went off with a loud click, and Sandra almost wept as she watched the ceiling fan slow to a stop. She flung open the bedroom windows, then wanted to slam them shut again when she didn't even find a breeze outside. But she left them open for ventilation. She was afraid that she and Krishna would bake like two loaves of bread in the room if she kept it closed up. She ripped five pages out of the *Vogue* her mom had sent her in a parcel two months ago and made a thick fan out of the pages. She stood over Krishna's crib and made little gusts of wind with the fan for him to breathe under. She searched his face for signs of herself. His skin was different, and so was the shape of his nose and eyes and chin. They were all distinctly Indian, modeled and molded after Sanjay and his ancestors. Sandra reached into the crib and rubbed the place over Krishna's left eyebrow with gentle fingers. His skin was so soft and new, unaffected by worry. She hoped it would always be this way for him. He made a gurgling noise and Sandra smiled at him. "Does that feel nice?"

Krishna kicked a foot in the air, so Sandra played with his toes. They were like hers, long and then round at the top. She leaned further down into the crib, examining every inch of her child, looking for evidence that he was really from her body. He had her lips, wider than Sanjay's and fuller. She sighed and straightened, still waving the fan over him, but now looked around the room and felt its silent walls press in on them. She didn't know how long she'd been standing over Krishna's crib when she heard a timid knock at the door. She glared at it and then threw the fan on her bed and stomped over to the door.

When she flung it open, ready with shrill words, she found her mother-in-law's maid holding a tray with a glass of lime juice and ice. The sweat on the glass made Sandra's mouth water. She took the glass and said, "Thanks."

"No mention," the maid said and waited for Sandra's response. Her husband had taught her that—he said that when white people said, "Thanks," you had to say, "No mention."

It took a minute to register what she had just heard, and when it did, she threw her head back and laughed. "That's great!" Sandra said. Her eyes sparkled momentarily and the hard line of her mouth stretched out into a more relaxed shape. The maid saw the pale pink moles on Sandra's neck as her head fell back in laughter and wanted to touch them. The maid went away feeling pleased with herself; the poor girl deserved to laugh after the morning's ordeal.

The sense of isolation and loneliness that Sandra thought she'd escaped when she married Sanjay found her again. It crept up along her spine on spindly legs and settled itself at the base of her neck when she was least expecting it. Sandra felt the change wash through her as she stood over Krishna's crib fanning him. This feeling was different from being homesick, different from the passing sense of sadness that came from being in a new place surrounded by new people. This feeling was deeper and darker and made her feel like she was made of paper-thin glass that could crack into pieces without warning. She clutched the fan tight in her hands and gritted her teeth, thinking that maybe if she didn't cry, she would be OK. If she didn't open herself up, the feeling would have no place to enter her and she would be fine.

She had felt this thing a few months before Krishna was born and had battled with it as Krishna slipped out of her. It was only hovering then, and went away when the baby was born, leaving her to glow and revel in being a new mother. Only a week later, and it was back. No, Sandra decided that she would fight it this time. She wouldn't cry or shiver or do anything else to acknowledge the depression. It pricked the soft skin of her neck with a long leg.

When Sandra opened the door a second time that day, a servant boy stood holding a tray with a letter from Sanjay on it. Sandra took the letter, thanked the boy, and closed the door.

Downstairs, the boy told Dhanushini that maybe she should call the doctor because "Sandra *Akka* looked like a ghost, and her hands were shaking, and she was crying."





Paul D'Amato's photographs were taken below Chicago's Lake Street L. Imagine the ear-splitting growl of twenty-ton trains lumbering through ribbons of light formed by the web of steel girders overhead.

All photographs untitled, from *Lake Street L Project*, 2003  
Paul D'Amato

























# Target Practice

Steve Swanson

“AFTER SCHOOL. WE’RE GONNA DO IT.”

The words had been echoing in Breech’s head since Nick uttered them during lunch. The clatter of trays competed with a gaggle of seventh-grade girls to drown out the directive. Breech himself was only in seventh grade at Woodrow Wilson Junior High and took a great amount of pride in the fact that he sat amongst the eighth graders at their territorial tables. He was terrified of rejection, and the only way he knew how to deal with this was to pretend he was Johnny Carson and everyone he met was a guest on his private talk show. He felt safe in this scenario, and he liked to think that he had a great sidekick in Nick.

Nick’s exuberance was even more dramatic than Breech’s. He was a born bullshitter. He was tall and had short black hair. He looked athletic, but he had no interest in sports. His only concern as of late was responding to his sudden hormonal urgencies. He had been entertaining the entire table for the past week with stories about going to the neighborhood Target and stealing condoms. He had boosted them twice, each time grabbing two boxes, giving him a supply of four dozen. Nick talked about how cool it felt to jerk off while wearing a rubber. He said it was great that you didn’t have to stop at the last



second and make sure you had a Kleenex ready. You could just let yourself go.

Breech listened to all of the stories with wide eyes. As in any other red-blooded, American, midsized, Midwestern town, a close enough approximation to the elusive act of sex was all that was needed to keep the awakening males occupied and out of trouble. Neither Breech or Nick had been anywhere near a girl, much less a fully blossomed woman, though both constantly fantasized about it. The town was still pretty provincial in its attitudes towards sex. Even though their respective birds and bees talks were given two miles and eighteen months apart, and their parents were unaware of each other, they gave their boys the same book. It was called *How Did I Get Here?* It had big pages with small print and large cartoons.

None of the adults in town discussed sex, except for the grayhaired teacher who taught music, health, and P.E. Rumor went around that she was a lesbian, mainly spread by boys who didn't know the meaning of the word. She was always saying, "If you're going to have sex, you need a condom!" She said it slowly and clearly as she peered over her glasses at the class. Somewhere along the line, this message had twisted itself around in the boys' heads. Maybe it was the fact Sarah Wagner sat in front of Nick, and he spent most of his class hour mentally undressing her. Whatever made the message twist, it entered into his mind that if he were to come into possession of some condoms, then the sex would follow.

"If you get them, they will come," Nick had recently taken to saying.

It was now seventh period. Math. Breech often spent his time talking with Sanja, the girl behind him. She had a dark complexion and thin lips that drove him crazy. He thought of her constantly. There were rumors that she was already doing it. Breech was sure that if he could just get some condoms himself, she would be so impressed with his daring bravado, all for her, that she would instantly offer herself to him. He would return as the conquering hero.

The seed planted in his mind festered for forty-eight more agonizing minutes of class. Sheets. Sanja. Condoms. Target. He was getting wound tighter and tighter. Finally, the second hand swept past the twelve, the bell rang, and Breech followed Sanja out of the room, his eyes never straying from her denim-skirted backside.

He ran to his locker, grabbed his backpack, and headed down to the industrial arts wing. Nick was already waiting. They cruised down the hall and out the heavy double doors. As they walked across the field, through the ravine, and across the vast blacktop parking lot, Breech started to get nervous. The Target was now in plain sight.

"You just grab 'em?" Breech asked, trying not to sound too nervous.

“Yeah. Just keep moving, and we’ll be out before you know it.”

“And what? Just shove ’em in your pocket?”

“Yeah. Go for the ribbed kind. They feel great, and they’ve got all these ridges, specially designed for her pleasure.” Nick smiled. He had read the back of the box to the point of memorization and hadn’t even realized it.

Breech gained confidence from his gray shorts with their corduroy pipes and ample room. He untucked his Led Zeppelin T-shirt from his shorts and let the long, black shirt flow far below his pockets. Breech was a good half-foot shorter than Nick. He had John Lennon-style glasses and short curly hair. He carried a handkerchief at all times and Nick ribbed him mercilessly about it. To the outside eye, they were an adolescent Laurel and Hardy.

As they entered the store, Breech held his breath and realized he now had one last chance to back out. It occurred to him he could just as easily buy the condoms. He could still have sex with Sanja. He smiled for a moment but then felt his ears get hot. He found the idea of taking a box of condoms up to a sales clerk to be paralyzing. He remembered Jenny from the next street over. Didn’t her mom work here? What if he gathered up the courage to actually buy the condoms so that he and Sanja could be together and be in love? He would march them right up to the red counter and gladly throw down his money, only to shrink in fear as Jenny’s mom would recognize him, look at his illicit purchase, and then call his mom to tell her she was raising some kind of sex pervert. At the very least, Jenny sure wouldn’t be able to come over to the house anymore. No thanks. No confrontation. Stick to the original plan.

It was a typical Target store, fluorescent lighting and housewives stocking up on toilet paper and stretch pants. Nick led the way. Breech followed and looked to his left, past the rows of check-out lanes, down to the offices. Nick blazed a trail to the music section of the store. He muttered under his breath that he didn’t want to seem too anxious to get the bait. “Better make it look as though you’re actually looking at something,” he said as he lazily flipped through CDs and DVDs.

Breech took a deep breath and tried to blend in with the surroundings. He just wanted to get this over with. He was sweating, and he just wanted to get home and think about Sanja. Nick glanced up and down the aisles. They were totally empty. It was a perfect opportunity. Breech felt a tingle rising from the pit of his stomach. He felt like a very small mouse in a huge, white, walled maze. A mild electric current corkscrewed down through his legs; he felt an unusual gravity in his feet.

He looked at Nick, whose naturally frenetic nature was starting to amplify.

Nick's jerky arms began picking up random items, beating a path towards the pharmaceuticals. His movements were wild and he was slamming things down. He spun around and made his way through the book section, stopping abruptly to thumb through a *Mad* magazine. He turned the pages five at a time. He glanced to his left and tossed the magazine over his right shoulder, nearly striking an old white-haired lady in a yellow hat. He didn't look back as she yelled at him.

Breech held his breath and followed, trailing the blur of his friend. He momentarily lost Nick and began to panic. He also noticed, for the first time, the other people in the store. Nobody seemed to be interested in his friend, who was doing some sort of crazed rain dance down the aisles. He couldn't lose his cool now. He collected himself and began stalking one of the major, but fairly empty aisles. He made two consecutive left turns, then a right, past the Q-tips, and across from the nacho cheese party dip, he found Nick. He had calmed and was now coolly spellbound, comparing the different styles of condoms available to him.

"Dude. Look at this!" Nick held up a box of Durex-brand Fiesta condoms. The package was shocking pink with garish horizontal stripes of green, blue, and yellow. There was a close-up of a very beautiful dark-haired couple. The woman had a smile so large she could have swallowed Lake Erie.

"I'm getting the Fiestas!" Nick looked at Breech with a maniacal grin. His eyes burned with the fire of latex lust. He grabbed two boxes from the wire rack and took off around the corner. Breech turned and faced the selection. So many choices. Geez. He hadn't even thought ahead this far. He saw the Trojan ribbed and remembered Nick's grinning endorsement. The box showed a silhouette of a couple on a far-off beach. It looked fairly tame compared to the crazed libidos run amuck on the front of the Fiesta box. Still, Breech was more the romantic type.

"I wish there was a beach here," he thought as he plunged a box into each of his pockets.

His pulse was racing, and his legs didn't wait for a signal from his brain to get moving. He was sure that if he stopped for even a moment, his body's nervous system would short circuit, and he would shit right there on the bleached Target floor tile.

Nick was ahead of him. They headed back to the magazines and books. Nick stopped so suddenly that Breech ran into him. They looked around. They looked at each other. The usual Target business seemed uninterrupted by their actions.

As his heart rate began to slow for the first time, Breech was aware of the



bad music being piped throughout the store. He and Nick exchanged a knowing look. They couldn't keep from grinning as they headed towards the doors. It was getting late, and the sun was setting on the horizon just outside the doors. The door area where all the carts were corralled was filled with a blazing yellow sunset, which was reflected off a thousand metallic shopping carts. The parking lot looked so warm and inviting. Breech looked into the sunset and saw himself with Sanja, perfectly re-enacting the cover of the Trojan's ribbed condom box. The blacktop would be their beach and they could frolic, arm-in-arm, with their newfound, liberating prophylactics.

They were halfway through the shopping cart holding zone when a small man with a moustache wearing a worn baseball cap and bad aviator sunglasses approached them. He stepped in front of the boys, waving his hands up in their faces. In his right hand they both saw a gleam of sunlight reflect off of the cheaply forged badge that honored no known police force, but rather a generic label of "Security."

"Target security. Back in the store." The words were such a shock to their systems that they immediately turned around with the precision of the queen's honor guard. Breech and Nick looked at each other, then straight ahead. The store suddenly seemed to have twice as many people in it, and the boys sensed that they were creating an uneasy riptide through the crowd. The security guard gave them further instructions: "When you reach the end of the aisle, take a right. Keep your hands at your sides. Walk to the twin doors and go through them."

Breech stole a glance over his shoulder at the man who had ensnared them. He was easily six inches shorter than Nick. Breech noticed the man had been talking from below them. He wondered if maybe they should make a run for it. It didn't matter. He didn't seem to have control of his feet anyway.

"I knew we shouldn't have done that," Nick said from the corner of his mouth to Breech. They turned right. The linoleum path wound itself through jewelry, shoes, and women's clothing. A set of industrial double doors loomed before them, with small, thick, square windows, and near the bottom a piece of clear plastic designed to take the abuse of carts, dollies, anything that might come crashing through from the back out onto the floor. Breech tried to peer through the window for a sign of anything, but it was too dark. He was on the verge of crying, and the effort it took to keep from doing so gave him a headache, a large knot in the exact center of his brain.

"Through these doors."

The boys passed through the swinging metal doors. The area reminded

Breach of an empty and dark warehouse. The security guard opened a nondescript door on the right. A female store employee sat behind a small metal desk. She had long red hair, wore glasses, and had the familiar shape of a corn-fed whiskey pig, as Nick liked to call them. At least it wasn't Jenny's mom. He wondered if she would find out about this. The girl seemed to be bored by the whole routine and laid two forms side by side on identical clipboards, ready for their vital information. The room was sparse, only a desk, three chairs, a filing cabinet and one tiny black-and-white screen that showed a grainy, curved image of the store's interior.

Breach sat down and tried to regain his mental footing. In all of his planning and hoping he had honestly never even considered this possibility. The plan had seemed so natural, simple, and pure that just bringing up the possibility of failure would surely have cursed the entire operation. It began to dawn on him that he would soon have to explain himself. What was he going to tell his mother? He had been confirmed only two weeks before. She would tell his grandma. His skin got hot, and he felt embarrassed for himself.

The man spoke to both boys, but he was outside of Breach's thoughts. Breach gave quick and reflexive replies when asked his name, his parents' names, and their phone number. His hair stood on end. There was no justifying his actions. He couldn't explain to his mother that what had driven him to this point was the want of love from one special girl. She wouldn't understand. His heart sank as the man picked up the phone and dialed. Breach couldn't see a clock. He didn't know what time it was. Would she be home from work yet? He strained for any sound to leak from the receiver's ear. His mind filled with a black-and-white image of his mother in tears, gnashing her teeth and wailing. She would kick him up the stairs of the church to go talk to a priest. Three more heartbeats and he envisioned his mother answering the phone, listening for a moment and then clutching her heart and dropping the phone as she fell to the floor in slow motion.

The guard looked at the number on the form, the phone, and then back at Breach. After a dozen protracted rings, he hung up. Breach felt his lungs relax and the air seemed suddenly cool and fresh to him.

The guard made Breach remain silent while he interrogated Nick. Breach watched the mouths of Nick and the rent-a-cop, but the exchange failed to imprint on his memory. The only sound he recalled was when Nick was asked about his eye color and Nick offered a specific "steel gray." Breach looked at his older friend and saw him as all fidgety feet, hands covering his mouth, eyes glued to the floor. After a few more uncomfortable moments, the guard took

Breech out of the room and back into the harsh light of the main floor.

The security guard's aviator shades had now become transparent, and Breech noticed his eyes for the first time. They were a pale green and seemed to be surrounded by sagging and pale flesh. They looked desperate, like they were defeated a long time ago. The thing that really creeped Breech out was that this man never blinked. "You know you're a very lucky young man. The total value of the merchandise you tried to take came to \$9.98. And it's Target policy to prosecute all shoplifting cases over ten dollars. You just made the break, kid. Your friend in there? He ain't so lucky. He went for the fancy stuff and his total came to \$10.47, and now I've got to call the cops." His eyes tried to burn a hole at the base of Breech's skull.

The security guard took a moment to readjust his cap. His lanky arm smoothed back his hair, tugged the lid, and resumed his chiding. Breech just now noticed that the guard chewed gum with an unnatural determination. He nodded with his head and chewed his gum, never breaking Breech's gaze.

"As for you, we want to talk to your mom. We've got your number, and we're gonna keep calling, so you'd better tell her to call us first. Second, you're not allowed in the store by yourself, ever. If you do come in, you'll have to be with your mom and you're gonna have to be like this . . .," the guard snapped to attention, hands at his sides and stiff as a board. He pointed at the air between them to punctuate his words. "Don't . . . touch . . . a-ny-thing."

After a moment, Breech realized that he had been dismissed. He hung his head and made his way out of the store, never looking back.

The sun was starting to set. The would-be-conqueror slunk back towards home, tail between his legs and mind full of confused thoughts of trying to explain his behavior. What would he tell his mom? Why did he think that if he had condoms, that would automatically lead to sex? What did he know about women? What did he know about himself? The only thing he knew for sure was that he felt cheated. He was in trouble and never even got a single condom to show for it.

He walked the long slope of the driveway, watching his shadow get taller and taller, until the silhouette of his hand met his flesh on the knob of the front door. He turned and gently stepped inside. They never locked the door. There was nothing inside worth taking. Breech put his bag down and looked at the clock. Mom would be home in about half an hour.

He went downstairs to his room. Mom had the upstairs, and she stayed there. Breech liked his privacy. He lay down on his bed, with its *Star Wars* comforter. The room was dark. The only light coming in was the dim residue of the



sunset that leaked through the garden windows and threw splashes of gold on the white ceiling as he lay on his bed and looked up. Breech liked the dark. He had been tense all afternoon. He had been thinking about Sanja in math class. Since math. Since Nick first told him that they were gonna do it after school.

He watched the gold flashes of light, and they reminded him of Sanja and her short brown hair over her light-brown face. He always saw her in golden tones. He thought about her smooth, dark skin and the neck that the short hair revealed. Those pretty lips. He sighed and knew what he had to do. Soon Nick would be sentenced to court supervision for a year. He himself would be grounded for the better part of three months and forbidden to make contact with Nick. His mom would be home any minute, but fuck it. At least right now he could have his one fantasy. He kicked off his shorts and reclined on his bed, with visions of Sanja dancing in his head.

They were on a beach in Florida. No, Hawaii! No, Jamaica! Fuck it! It didn't matter where they were, as long as it had the vague eroticism of a Coppertone ad. For a while, Breech was able to tune out all of the distress, all of the wrongdoing, and here he was, up against her naked, lithe body. She gazed up into his eyes while playfully nibbling his belly. She laid her bare arms around him. He slowed down several times, trying to extended the pleasure, trying to extend his fantasy. He didn't know when things might feel this good again.

# Lawrence, Ladybird, and Loss

Jesse Jordan

MARIE SAT IN HER KITCHEN, WATCHING THE SUNLIGHT DANCE IN HER CUP OF tea. She took her first sip and enjoyed the warmth in her mouth. She had all the windows open so the air would circulate on this oppressive August afternoon. Because of the open windows, she didn't need any lights on; the room was overly bright already.

Marie adjusted her housecoat, pulling it tighter across her chest, then reached down and picked up the letter. She had opened the rest of the mail a half hour ago but had decided to get herself settled before she read this one.

It was from Dominic. She had known that even before her eyes read the letters, put them together, and sent the message to her brain. She knew it the second the bill on top of it had been cleared away. She knew the arc of his *D*, the swirl that was his *O*, and the depressions in the paper, caused because he always pressed too hard. She saw that he had sent the letter from California, and she wondered whether he was still there. Marie turned the letter over so she could tear it open, and noticed once again how thick it was. She slid the tarnished brass letter opener under the flap, tore up, and gently pulled the letter from the envelope. She laid it out gingerly so that it was resting, barely unfolded, on the yellow Formica table top in front of her. She took another sip

of her tea, picked up her hornrimmed reading glasses, placed them on the bridge of her nose, and began to read.

Mom,

If I figure right, then you're reading this exactly one week after Dad's funeral. I'm sorry I wasn't there. I'm sorry I wasn't there for you guys' fortieth anniversary, too, and Joe's graduation, and his wedding, and everything else you've begged me to be at over the last twelve years.

I'm writing to you because I want to clear up some stuff. I want to clear up why I wasn't there, why I won't be there, why I don't answer your letters anymore, everything. I've been trying to make myself write this letter for a long time, but I could never quite build up the stones to do it. Now, though, I figure with me missing Dad's funeral, you're all torn up inside, and I owe you at least this much. I owe you an explanation. I owe you a reason why I haven't been there, and why I won't ever be there again.

I know when I got back you guys tried your best. I know how fucked up I was and how hard I must have been to be around and how scary it must have been for you when I'd wig out or start crying. How well do you remember that time, Ma? Do you remember how wonderful you were with me? Sometimes you'd come into my room at night when I was remembering, sweating, and pissing myself, and you'd hold me. Do you remember what I would do? I'm sure you do. I'd start screaming at you, I'd push you off, and I remember one time I spit right in your face. I spit in your face. But the next time I flipped out, there you were again. I knew you loved me, that's what hurt so much. I could see all that love, but what I knew, what you couldn't see, was that the son you loved was gone. I knew that you would always love your son, so much so that you would cradle the stranger in his bed who happened to look like him.

Do you remember the day I got out of the loony bin? (I know you hate it when I call it that, but we're not gonna bullshit in this letter, and that's what it was.) It was really cold the day I got out. They let me out just as the sun was coming up on that gray morning. I walked around the building, walked over to the east side so I could watch the sun come up, so I could watch the sun come up through empty, winter branches. I had bummed a smoke off this one guard, and I was sitting there, smoking and feeling winter, watching my breath, wondering what was smoke and what was me. That's when I heard it. I heard the Impala's horn and looked over and there you guys were. You were waving and smiling. I got into the car and Dad drove to Krispy Kreme, and we all sat



in this clean, white booth and drank steaming-hot coffee, trying real hard not to stare at each other. Then Dad asked me what did it, and I choked on my coffee for a second. He asked me what it was. He didn't get it, I guess 'cause his war had been a lot cleaner. He didn't get it, but he wanted to. He wanted me to tell him what thing, what man, what day had done this to me. I couldn't look at him when I answered, "Everything."

That was the truth. The truth was that it was everything: every day, every man, every breath. They were all the worst, and they all hurt a little more than the one just past. But I'm playing coy again, aren't I? I knew what he wanted. He didn't want *everything*, he wanted one thing, and I didn't tell him. Well, I want to tell you. I feel like I owe it to you. I feel like it's my duty to make you understand why I'm never coming home.

Our platoon had been given a two-week reassignment at a barracks not far from Saigon. We had been there for a week and a half, and we were enjoying our last four days out of the bush. I had already been in country about two months. That was long enough to know the rules and no longer be considered a cherry, but not so long that I didn't give a shit anymore. It was a few days after the rain had stopped, and only two days before we were to head back in, when he came. He came in with a resupply drop and hitched a ride on the helicopter. He was a tall, strong-looking kid, with the brightest blond hair I'd ever seen. Jesus, I remember that I thought it was white the first time I saw him. He jumped out of the copter like a kid jumps out of a fort: arms out, knees up, that look of blissful fear on his face. He landed and popped up, the wind from the copter's blades barely registering with him. He looked around. He didn't look around like the other cherries did (myself included), with that look of absolute loss, confusion, and fear, like someone set you down in Hell without a roadmap. No, when he looked around there was this odd, sort of big-eyed half-smile, this look of wonder and wisdom.

The first time I actually met him was in the mess hall. I saw him sitting by himself, and I walked over. When I got closer I noticed that he was humming. I couldn't believe it. Here was a guy, first day in country, the most horrifying fucking day ever, and this kid is humming. I couldn't make it out, but I had that tickle in my brain that said I knew the tune, knew its crescendos and breaks. Just then, though, he looked up, saw me, and stopped humming.

His name was Lawrence. Samuel Franklin Lawrence, but he would just be known as Lawrence from then on. (Oddly enough, Ma, he reminded me of Lawrence of Arabia—well, actually Peter O'Toole playing Lawrence of Arabia.)

He was from Philadelphia, and he had a wife and no kids. That was the regular stuff, and to tell you the truth I didn't care much about it. What I cared about was this kid. Not who he was before when he lived in the world, but who he was now in the Nam. He had this quality about him. It was that thing I had noticed the first time I saw him—that fearlessness. It was like he didn't know where he was, like he didn't know how bad it was. But it wasn't his naiveté. It wasn't like he didn't understand it. It was just like, I don't know, like none of this shit could touch him. That's what drew me to him, Ma. I wanted, so badly, for some of that to rub off on me. I wanted to feel like Lawrence, wanted to be fearless.

Throughout the meal, I learned something else about Lawrence. I learned that he had the most respected trait a grunt could have over there. He was funny as hell. It was mostly really dirty stuff (the kind that Dad always loved, Ma) or he would do this impression of Johnson that was fucking hilarious. It was LBJ looking at a map of Vietnam and all the casualty lists and the names of the soldiers and whacking off. Lawrence would get into it; sometimes he'd writhe right up 'til his back was arched and he was halfway on the table screaming, "You little yellow bastards! You know how I like it!" Oh, Ma, we all just about died. I couldn't help it; I really liked that kid.

I say I couldn't help it, because this wasn't a good thing. You didn't want to start liking the people you met over there. You could be friendly with them. Hell, you had to, but you didn't want to actually become friends. You don't want friends, because friends die. It's hard enough when five guys you know get nailed, but five friends . . . shit. I mean don't get me wrong, Ma, sometimes you can't help it. But you don't ever get tight with a cherry; I don't care how cool or funny or different he is. Cherries are stupid. They walk off to take a piss and get sniped; they don't look where they're going, and they step on a Betty, or maybe they just accidentally shoot their own dumbass selves. But I couldn't help it with Lawrence.

The rest, I guess, is just bonding kinda stuff. Does it matter if he looked at pictures of my girl or if I looked at pictures of his wife, if I covered for him or he stole me some smokes? Point is, we got pretty tight, got to be spending almost all our free time together, drinking and laughing, trying to forget where we were going. Point is, he was my only friend over there.

After two weeks at the barracks, we got airlifted to a forward position right on the Cambodian border. We spent about two weeks there, then we crossed into Cambodia. You probably heard we weren't in Cambodia. That, like 'most everything else, was bullshit. We were in Cambodia, and let me tell you, Ma,

that was the scariest fucking place I ever been. Mitchell, he was this flabby piece of shit in my platoon, he kept saying how beautiful it was, but I didn't see it. All I saw was black. There were these giant, black, and sickly yellow trees everywhere. Mitchell said they were rubber trees. They had these long branches that hung down like they were some evil cousin of a weeping willow. Wherever they were the air was thick. You'd spit, and, I swear to God, it would hang there for a second before it fell. Mitchell said the air felt like that because rubber trees created more oxygen than other trees; he said they were really quite amazing. He just kept going on and on about the trees, the fucking layout of the land, the majestic beauty of it all. God, I wanted to punch him right in his fat, fucking face.

Two days later we were on a basic search and destroy. (That's just, you see something, you kill it.) We were covering an area that was basically ten square miles of those suffocating rubber trees with a factory dead smack in the middle. The day started out like most others. We humped a few clicks this way, a few clicks that way, basically walking around in circles through the hottest, wettest place on earth. It wasn't until about noon that the day changed, became the day it was meant to be.

We were making our third loop of the day. The sun was as high as it went, hitting every single inch of that country, drenching us all in stifling, torturous heat. Then, as we're passing the west side of the factory, a single shot rings out. We all drop to the ground and raise our weapons, but nothing else happens. We listen for a couple of minutes, scared shitless, our weapons poised at our shoulders, but nothing happens. So we start calling off to make sure everyone's OK. Riley, check. Lawrence, check. Thompson, check. Mitchell. . . I remember that it was Bugs who first said, "Oh shit." Then we all looked over, and we saw Mitchell. He had taken a slug at the base of his skull. Thankfully, he landed on his face, so we couldn't see the nightmare he'd become. He was dead instantly.

Immediately, Sergeant Lang starts in with the orders. He's barking at us to grab this and carry that and move Mitchell, when, all of a sudden, it really starts. Gunfire just fills the air; it was like a metal storm. Riley and Mennolossino are hit right off the fucking bat. We're down again now, but this time we're firing. We're all firing. We're holding our triggers down, pissing our pants, screaming at some invisible enemy. Not aiming, but firing in the general direction of the factory. We couldn't tell if the enemy fire was coming from inside the factory or just behind it, but that's the direction and that's where our goddamned bullets were going. We realize, and we do it quickly, that we're fucked. They got the position, and, from the sound of it, they got us outnumbered. Sergeant Lang



grabs Diaz, the radio operator, and starts swearing. I couldn't hear what he was saying, but I could see that he wanted Diaz to hurry the fuck up. I slipped over by Diaz, because I knew he was new and I had been a radio operator in my first platoon. Lang was slapping him on the head and screaming at him, and Diaz was starting to cry, and he couldn't get a signal, and the gunfire was splitting the rubber trees around us. Diaz had forgotten how far west we were, so I reached over and adjusted for the move and the radio jumped to life. Lang was on it before the first crackle was done. He started screaming into the radio about our situation and our need for an immediate air strike. They asked our coordinates, and when Sergeant Lang gave them there was a long pause. Then we were told to await further instructions. Lang flipped out. He kicked the radio and spit profanities at the sky, and he even fired his weapon twice into a nearby rubber tree. Finally, the radio crackled to life again, but now with a different voice. It was a much deeper voice. It was a voice filled with authority and sternness. It said that not only would we be getting no air strike, but we were to evacuate immediately and in no way harm the factory. Lang started to scream into the radio, but it stopped him. The voice was back, and it said (and I'll always remember this), "Sergeant Lang, you will comply with orders and disperse immediately." You could see Lang's face fall along with the mouthpiece. You could see what he was thinking—who the fuck is it that knows who I am? He looked at me and we both knew it: this had come down from up on high. We had no choice but to obey. We had to scram, but that part about not firing back was going to have to sit in the trunk. Lang and I rounded up everyone as well as we could. We told them that we had to go. Half the platoon kept shooting, giving cover, and the other half gathered the wounded and dead. We put the wounded and dead on the flats and headed southeast as fast as our asses could go. I was gathering. I had just helped Riley onto a flat when I noticed a body slumped over the trunk of a fallen rubber tree. I stayed low and loped over. The first thing I noticed when I got there was the blonde hair. I saw that clean, shining, blonde hair speckled with blood, and I knew. I rolled him over, but the blonde hair didn't come with him. It looked like a heavy-duty slug had caught him in the throat. His head hung by a few spare muscles and tendons, soaked with the quarts of blood that had poured out. Then, all of a sudden, he started to blur. I couldn't see him. That was when I realized I was crying. It was the first and only time I cried in that country.

Marie brought her cup to her lips and tipped it, but it was dry. She set the letter down and licked the cool, last drop that had trickled down her chin. She

stood up slowly from the chair. She wanted to run into the other room so bad, wanted to run and tell Marco what she was reading. She stopped herself about a foot short of the doorway. Marco's not there. Marco's dead.

Marie's hand was trembling as she poured herself another cup of tea. It shook with the effort of lifting the large pot and the sudden remembrance of her husband's death and the terror of the moment her son had finally shared with her, but, mostly, it shook with anticipation. She rushed back to the table, set the cup down, and forgot about it. She gathered the letter up, roughly now, pushed her reading glasses back on, and resumed reading.

I'm gonna jump forward a little, Ma, cause the rest of that shit ain't important to this story, and I'm trying real hard to just tell you this story, get this god-damned story out. So, other guys that got wasted, bad shit I did, I'm gonna skip all that, all right. I'm gonna leave it all where it is and try to finish what I'm trying to say.

It was my last week in country. I got choppered out of the bush, flown to Saigon. I spent that week doing what I think most guys did. I got drunk. Went to whores, did everything you couldn't do when you were in the shit. It's funny, you spend the first half of your time trying to remember how to be a person, the second half trying to forget.

Anyway, it was my last night; I was flying out in the morning. I was at this bar. Nothing special about it—low, yellow light, chipped concrete, and some bullshit gook decorations. There was an older guy sitting next to me. We had been getting drunk together on this cheap, Korean beer that tasted like shit (you'd be surprised how easy it is to get used to shit) and bullshitting for a few hours before I noticed it. I looked over, mid-laugh, I think, and I saw these shiny, silver stars. Two perfect stars on his shoulder, peeking out from under the army regulation sweater he was wearing. He was a general, Ma. I freaked, figured being sloppy drunk in front of a general was something they'd have your balls for. So I jumped up. I stood up real quick so I could salute (out of habit, I guess), but my boot got caught on one of the rungs of my stool. My leg went out behind me, and I did a face plant straight on the floor. He couldn't stop laughing.

The two of us got on pretty well. We were telling funny stories about guys catching the clap from fifty-year-old, one-legged whores, and weird stories about red rivers full of fish floating on their backs. Then we started telling horror stories. I told one about this guy I knew who thought there were VC hiding in this one hutch, so he threw a grenade in. Turns out it was a school,

and the noises he heard were just kids scared to come out. So this general tells me he can beat that. He tells me he's got a story I won't believe. Then he told me the most horrible, fucking thing I ever heard.

"There was this platoon over in Cambodia, OK? They're thumping around when all of a sudden they're under fire. They get in a firefight by this factory, OK? Well, they're totally screwed. They're pinned down, they're taking heavy casualties, and probably shitting their pants, right? So what do they do? They call an air strike, of course. But they're told not only will there not be an air strike, but they need to get the fuck out of there, and they ain't allowed to fire on the factory. Now, you know why that happened? Do you wanna know why those sons a bitches got slaughtered? Well, I'll tell you. See, Cambodia's full of rubber trees, shitloads of 'em, everywhere you look, and the labor's cheap as dirt. So you know what the factory was? It was a Goodyear factory. There's a standing order that no harm can come to it. Way I heard it is, Ladybird Johnson's got a goddamned truckload of stock in Goodyear, and that's where that order came from. Can you believe that? So these poor bastards get blown to shit just so Ladybitch's stock doesn't drop."

Just so her stock doesn't drop, Ma. Did you get that? Did you fucking get that? Stock. Fucking paper slips, ownership in some tire company, and Lawrence's head won't stay on, and his face is mush. That general told me that story, and every little part of my body started to shake and die. I couldn't feel my face, and my lungs squirmed, and I could feel my heart giving out, quitting. I got out of there. I ran out, and I was in some alley, still holding my bottle of cheap beer, no coat or money, but I had that cheap, fucking, Korean beer. I smashed it on the wall and took it to my chest. I wanted to feel something else, but I couldn't. I couldn't feel nothing but that crush. No matter how deep I cut, all I could see was Lawrence smiling, and Lawrence's weak skin peeling, exposed skull, and this shot of Ladybird I had seen on the news one time when she was getting some plaque for something or other.

Do you get it, Ma? Fuck, I don't even know if I get it. But this is important. Lawrence getting his fucking head removed poisoned me. The shit I did to human beings, which was worse than what happened to Lawrence 'cause I wanted to pay those gooks back for what they did to him, that fucking poisoned me. My country, Ladybird, the money, them selling me out, it all poisoned me. Does that make sense? Do you get why I can't come home? I've been poisoned. All I can do is contaminate you. Do you get it? If you don't, I want you to read this letter over and over until you do. No. No, don't do that. When you finish this letter I want you to burn it. I want you to burn it, and I



want you to burn the address under my name. No more fucking letters! Do you understand? No more, Ma. I want you to keep all the pictures of me. I want you to look at them and smile sadly and remember your son who died over there. I will not answer letters; I will not read them or open them or even accept them. I will throw them away or burn them or move and not give a forwarding address. I will not be there for the birth of Joe's first child or for its first birthday or even for your funeral. I am dead. Please let me be. All I ask is that you give my best to Dad when you see him.

P.S. I don't know if people like me get to see people like you when we die, but if we do, then I hope that when it happens I'll be the son that you loved.

Yours,

Pfc Dominic Angelo Annunziati

Marie gently set the letter back on the table. The light was still bright in the kitchen, but it seemed a slightly different shade now. The thought came to her quickly, "You're not breathing." She spastically drew a sharp breath into her lungs, and her eyes filled with tears. "You've lost two in two weeks," she thought, bemusedly, because it was the only emotion she could deal with at the moment. She took another deep breath and looked out at the yard where, for an instant, an image of Dominic and Joe and Marco playing ball streaked across the landscape, but she quickly dashed it away.

Marie put the front page of the letter back on top and refolded it, then reached over for the envelope and accidentally knocked the teacup from the table. The cup looked to her like it was falling in slow motion, with only drips of the now-cold tea escaping, but when it hit the marigold tile and shattered, the world caught up to itself again. The tea was projected in three different directions as the brittle china struck and shattered. The china shrapnel shot far in every direction. She could hear it hit the back door, and see miniscule sparkles in the living-room rug. Her eyes were locked on the hundreds of bits of sharp debris; her neck was locked, and her jaw was tight, and all she could think was, "I won't clean it up. I won't clean it up this time."

Marie finally managed to tear herself away from the floor and look back at the table. Once again she reached out, took the envelope, and stuffed the letter inside it. Her eyes drifted over to the stove and she could hear Dominic's voice tell her to burn it, hear him pleading. She pushed her chair away from the table and stood up, walked across the shimmering floor, past the stove, and over to the silverware drawer. Marie opened the drawer, lifted the tray that held the forks, knives, and spoons, and slid the letter under the tray. She let the tray fall

into place and closed the drawer. Then she turned around and looked out, again, at her yard in the sun-soaked afternoon. "That I can't give you," she said to herself, picturing Dominic outside playing with his little plastic army men, "I won't write, won't call. I'll let you be, I swear. But I need this. I need this moment with you. I need this little bit of you or I'll go crazy. OK?"

Marie looked out over the lawn for a few more seconds, through the screen her ghost family playing in front of her. Then she nodded slowly, as if an agreement had been made. She opened a cabinet, pulled out a broom and a dustpan, and turned back to the mess. She didn't know where to start.

# Abilene

Dorothea Duenow

ABILENE RAN AWAY FROM HOME AT THREE MONTHS OLD. THE FALL WINDS stirred up the weighted summer air, and Abilene, smelling the change, left the crib and food behind. Her mother, Kathleen, moaned aloud for weeks, wondering what terrible thing she had done, for not a woman on the island had ever heard of such a thing—a baby leaving its mother of its own volition. Her breasts cried out all of the milk meant for Abilene, and she bottled it methodically, storing it in glass jars in the refrigerator.

Aunt Ethel saw Abilene last from the old church window, scuffling like a fiddler crab through the Carolina mud, wearing no diaper, her round baby bottom shining like a new penny. No one knew where she disappeared to, but some women said that the sharp autumn winds had lifted up her tiny torso and blown her right out of the nursery. Other ladies on the island voiced carelessly, underneath the lamppost at the railway depot, that maybe Abilene was never meant to be Kathleen's child, and God had chosen to reclaim her.

Not long after Abilene's disappearance, Kathleen had another baby, a boy, and this one stayed. But Kathleen's grieving breasts made no milk for him. They hung, limp and dry from her chest, withered reminders of the love she had borne and lost.



The boy, Jeremy, sucked the milk Kathleen had saved for Abilene, his lips forcing a fondness for the surrogate rubber nipple, and he grew to be tall and strong. And though he was a good, sweet boy, he never replaced the lost Abilene. Kathleen's motherly urges had disappeared the same day her daughter crawled out of town. His father raised the boy, until the old man died—a slow, drawn-out dying that wrung out the rest of Kathleen's vitality.

Long after the islanders stopped dreaming about baby Abilene—and their hushed evening conversations, rolling under dim, yellow porch lights, covered only latest gossip—Abilene returned to the island. She arrived alone on the first day of her fifteenth summer, a walking reflection of floating light, under the gaze of a full moon. Wearing a red velvet dress that might have been measured and made for her by some caring hand, Abilene stirred up dust on the sandy road leading to the island. Her hair was long and so laced with dirt that it seemed a ruddy brown, although the roots were the color of her mother's milk.

Skiping alongside the creek, she paused every so often to bite into the pussy willows that leaned into the road, spreading their feathered seeds with quick blasts from her lungs. Maybe she recognized a familiar pattern in the tall shadows cast by the telephone poles as they stood sentry along the island's dirt road. Or perhaps it was the errant flight of the whippoorwill that led her past the glowing white frame church, past her Aunt Ethel's dilapidated cottage, and into the junk garden next to her momma's shed to rest.

That's where Kathleen found her the next morning, spread out amongst the abandoned tools, laying her head on a can of paint, one long leg propped up against the lawnmower, the other curled up beneath her dress. Instantly, she knew it was her Abilene by the plum-colored birthmark gracing her ankle like a bracelet of amethysts and by the warm recognition in her otherwise unfeeling breasts.

Every night of the following week, Kathleen tried to find out where Abilene had gone. But even though Kathleen bathed her tenderly, using the soft sponge to caress every last limb, and lovingly combed the mud out of her brilliant hair, Abilene would not speak to her mother at all, or perhaps she didn't know how to.

Her brother Jeremy, now a tall, white wall of twitching muscles and fluxing blood, shared the only extra space in bed with Abilene when she returned. He covered his eyes when she took off her single red dress and put a gentlemanly pillow in between their warm bodies, as they slept together in silence.

Almost all of the island women stopped by Kathleen's home to welcome Abilene and get a good look at her. Her unexpected return was enough to start their tongues flapping, but, beyond that, Abilene's strange beauty electrified

them, and made her seem somehow terrible. Her body was lean and long, and she moved like a sidewinder, quick and curving. They were openly curious about the way her vivid hair contrasted with the color of her skin. Abilene was as brown as the migrant farmers that passed through the island town every harvest, although her mother, her father, and her brother all had lily white skin.

Everyone in the town was waiting for Abilene to speak, and at the same time they feared that when she opened her silent mouth she would reveal answers that only presented more questions.

One morning, Abilene sprawled on the cool tile floor of Kathleen's kitchen, picking burrs off her velvet dress. She had been out in the night, trampling through the bushes, chasing fireflies that lit up the Carolina evenings like moving Christmas lights.

Kathleen stared at her daughter, transfixed. The sight of Abilene's ripening body and radiant tresses weighed like a heavy stone in Kathleen's chest, for it could only remind her of all the years she had missed. She had loved Abilene so deeply in her mind, praying to her memory, stifling tears and never daring to hope that she could still be alive, that the realization of her, and in such beautiful perfection was too much to bear. Kathleen longed to recreate the days of Abilene's infancy, to care for her without guilt or remorse, to love her fearlessly.

But these motherly longings seemed out of place now that Abilene was almost a woman. And to ease her own discomfort, Kathleen sent Abilene to work at the farm harvesting berries with the rest of the teenage girls who were on their summer break from school. In this way she hoped Abilene might learn to speak again, and her strangeness would melt away.

Abilene was so out of place amongst those island girls, like a sunflower in a field of dandelions, that they shunned her instinctively, refusing to work with her at all. Consequently, the supervisor sent Abilene to work with the retarded farmhand, Gardner, the only man amongst the rest of the employees at the farm who could be trusted to keep his distance.

Gardner was a four-foot-high knotted mass of misshapen muscles, and his twisted feet were equaled in ugliness only by the gnarled tangles of his hands. Yet for all of his awkward appearance, Gardner moved with the lightweight skip of a sandpiper and flashed a winsome smile when his eyes met Abilene's.

Upon their introduction, Abilene casually draped her basket over Gardner's arm, signaling to him that he should pick the fruit for the both of them. And this is how they spent their time together. He, moving like a whirling dervish, cleared row after row of blueberries with his practiced mitts while she slept languidly in the sun, waking only to snack on the ripened berries he would

occasionally place in small piles at her feet.

On her third day in the fields, Abilene grabbed Gardner's contorted hands and lay him down in a dirt row between the bushes. There, she climbed upon him, her brown body blocking out all the sun like an eclipse. They rocked together in silence and stopped only when a slow smile crept across Abilene's face and she let out a quiet growl. Abilene brought her knees to her chest and rolled from side to side to let the baby take hold. She then stood straight and trembling like an aspen, watching as Gardner breathed in and out, asleep in the shade of the blueberry bushes.

The news of Abilene's pregnancy hit the town like bad water. The islanders all believed that Jeremy, her brother, was responsible. At the depot the women talked:

"They momma had them sleeping in the same bed like they was babies, and him not even grewed up with her in the house."

"What about the men over at the farm? They've gotten other girls in trouble."

"They weren't allowed to go near, 'cept for that slow farmhand, but he wouldn't know his thingy from a snake in the grass."

"Her mother must be crushed. She was so happy when Abilene came back. And now this."

"She shoulda seen it comin'. That chile didn' belong to her anyhow, dark as she is."

"What's Kathleen goin' to do with her?"

"Put her up at Old Mabel's place, sure."

"What about Jeremy?"

"Well, she can't throw *him* out, then she'd have nobody—'sides, he cain't be blamed. That girl was a temptress."

Kathleen, hidden behind a wooden column, overheard all of their churlish words, her heart cracking at each unkind sentence like thin ice. She knew she had to make a choice, to save her family and to save her reputation.

And so it happened: Jeremy, once the admired son of the island, quickly became the boy whom no glance would meet. Of course, he was never asked to explain himself; for in that town, the women were to be believed and the men to be ignored.

Abilene didn't leave town. Though it broke her heart, Kathleen kicked her out of the house with angry hollow cries and buckets of real tears that fueled the chattering furnace of the island for weeks.

"We were better off without you!" Kathleen cried out unconvincingly from the front door. "How could you have done this to me and my boy? Get out! You're not welcome here!"



But while Kathleen fought to muster up public anger towards Abilene she had already whispered to her, behind closed doors, where to find food and shelter.

Abilene stood on the bottom step of her mother's porch, staring up at her with eyes that seemed cast in iron. She had no verbal response to the accusations, so she kicked off the shoes Kathleen had bought for her and proceeded to walk away in the direction her mother had pointed, across the iron tracks and beyond the cemetery, to Old Mabel's halfway house.

Abilene took up residence there, along with the other outcasts and orphans. They whispered heatedly behind her back, grateful to go unnoticed in her shadow, while the nurses eyed her protruding belly with a mixture of fear and envy.

As her pregnancy progressed, Abilene grew more mesmerizing, her red velvet dress tightening with the weight of her filling breasts, and her thickening behind. She took to walking in slow circles around the town in the evenings, past her Aunt Ethel's dilapidated cottage, past the glowing white frame church, in front of Kathleen's house. The men of the island dawdled on their porches and watched her pass by as they puffed on corn cob pipes, and rocked in high-backed chairs with quiet yearning.

When the late summer nights began to grow chilly, and the sun went to bed before they had changed out of their work-boots, they no longer allowed themselves even that dusky pleasure, because the sight of her changing body was too much to take.

Kathleen, too, couldn't keep herself from pushing the curtains aside to peer out of her bedroom at Abilene's growing frame when she passed by on her evening walk. She wondered about the baby to come, and recalled the long, barren, lifeless years when Abilene had vanished as her hands twisted knots in the thin curtains. This was Kathleen's punishment. Her guilt was matched only by Jeremy's soundless sorrow.

On a crisp evening near the end of summer, Abilene passed Kathleen's front lawn on her usual route. She was dawdling, all of her attention focused on the shrill singing of the cicadas.

Kathleen watched her from the bedroom window, the moonlight reflecting off her white hair, and her resolve broke. She would solve the problem of Abilene's pregnancy in some other way and still keep her family together.

Abilene's head snapped at the screeching cry of her mother's screen door, as it swung open and slammed shut. Kathleen raced out to the road and flashed a lamp in Abilene's face, stunning her like a batfowler netting his prey. Their eyes met and just for a moment, Kathleen felt alive again, the blood rushing

into her cheeks and her chest. Her hands reached out to touch Abilene's taut belly, which felt warm and full of strange power.

"My Abilene, what have I done? I can't toss you out like sour milk. Whatever's been said, you are still my only girl." As she spoke her voice became moist and more resonant, as though just being near her Abilene increased the flow of life through her veins.

"My darling girl, I have shamed you and myself. I'm so sorry for what I've done," she continued.

Kathleen wrapped her shawl around Abilene's stiff shoulders. She laced her hands between Abilene's strong torso and folded arms, saying, "Please, come home to your momma. I should have never sent you to Mabel's. My beautiful girl, you don't belong with such people."

Abilene, witnessing the raw need in her mother's eyes, relented. Her bare feet retraced the concrete path leading to the front porch. Her eyes instinctively shut as the cobwebs that leapt from tree to tree in the front yard like a pattern of fine lace, just high enough to be above her mother's head, clung to her own face with their sticky threads.

That night, Abilene slept in her mother's single bed. Jeremy was too afraid to even look at Abilene from his window, and Kathleen had forbidden him to be near her inside the house. The house had been comfortably sterile in her absence, but Abilene's return affected it like a waft of exotic perfume blazing through a drab prison. Jeremy locked himself in his room when he heard Abilene coming up the stairs.

"Tomorrow I'll take you to see the doctor," her mother whispered, brushing Abilene's silvery hair as she readied for bed. "He'll see that you'll be all right." And, though she lay cradled in Kathleen's arms, Abilene did not sleep through the night because of her mother's light singing, songs of children and demons.

The doctor made sure Abilene was all right. On the outskirts of town, far from where anyone could hear the cries of the unfortunate who showed up at his doorstep, he lay her down on his homemade cot and massaged her belly while his nurse strapped her arms and legs to the wooden table with safety belts.

Kathleen waited in the lobby, a brick barn that held two velvet church pews, staring at the plug-in radio that blurted out baseball statistics, flinching at the sounds, which escaped through the dark green curtain that denoted the doctor's operating room.

She wasn't sure that Abilene was screaming, because what she heard did not sound like the screams of a young girl, but the squealing grunts of an aged pig, as it was slowly slaughtered, first for its hoofs, ears, and tail; next for its eyes; and

lastly for its meat.

When the doctor was finished, he dropped the sloppy remains of Abilene's baby in a bucket outside the door. He washed his own hands with alcohol, wiping bloody prints on his stained apron. Abilene was unlocked from the table and the nurse dunked her naked body in a vat of ice-cold water. The shock of it wrenched her from her fetal position, transforming her into a steely dagger. Then the nurse wrapped her in a cloth diaper before she was brought out to the lobby to see her mother.

Kathleen tried to meet Abilene's gaze, but her eyes were motionless, speechless. They stared through Kathleen; they recognized nothing. When Kathleen reached out for Abilene's hands, Abilene withdrew them quickly, hugging herself in a death grip. But not before Kathleen could see the purple welts that marked Abilene's wrists, matching the birthmark on her ankle. She feared her daughter, like this, so stiff and detached. She reached out again, with a timid hand, to smooth Abilene's matted hair away from her face. Abilene leaned back, out of her reach, lurching with nausea.

That night Kathleen awoke to the howling wind that swooped into her bedroom window and banged the shutters like a toddler playing in the kitchen. She pulled her arms closer and realized that Abilene was no longer in her grasp. Frantically, she searched the room for Abilene, tossing pillows and sheets as though Abilene were a baby small enough to be lost in the bed. Then, fearing the worst, Kathleen rushed for the door of Jeremy's bedroom, terrified she would find Abilene inside, the two locked in some dirty embrace. She dug her nails into the door, but after Jeremy pushed the dresser aside to unlock it, and she burst inside his room, she saw that he was alone.

Kathleen ran downstairs, ripping the cabinets off their hinges, tossing furniture about, pushing over shelves, tearing pictures off the walls, and shredding curtains in her frenzy. Her search led her out into the street, where she covered her ears with her hands and screamed out, "ABILENE!"

Down the road, Kathleen saw trees swaying and toppling over. The tall poplar in her own front yard swerved unsteadily. As she looked up into the sky, the clouds split in halves, then into quarters, some of them reaching long fingers down to tear up the earth in great furrows. All through the island town, the sound of animals braying in the night mixed with the whistling and sucking sounds of houses coming apart. Splinters of glass, uprooted plants, birds' nests, shredded flags, and mailboxes danced above her head in miniature whirlpools.

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That night, the last of the summer, the wind ripped through the island town. Abilene, smelling the change, rose from her mother's bed. She took off her red velvet dress and unpinned her cloth diaper, tossing the ruddied clothes out the bedroom window, sighing as she watched them fly about in the whipping air.

She moved silently out of her mother's bedroom, passing Jeremy's locked door. She stopped for a moment, reaching out to touch the handle. Then she climbed down the stairs and out the front door, her bare feet leaving no trace.

The road was empty as Abilene walked out of town. With every heave of her chest, the wind tore the clapboard off the houses and made spider cracks in plaster walls. As tears formed crystal loops under her eyes, hail came down in egg-sized masses, pulverizing the fields, destroying all the summer crops. Abilene shook her long locks, and snow fell on the flowers decorating the islanders' pathways and windowsills.

She twisted her strong hair around her fingers and the doctor's body jackknifed in his bed, waking him from his sleep—the harder she twisted, the more he screamed, until his face turned white.

Abilene opened her mouth and released a piercing moan that shot straight above the clouds, and traveled as lightning. With a final shake of her head, the lightning surged and struck her mother's farmhouse straight through the center. The windows crashed outwards, in a splintering wave of glass that cascaded over the front lawn, descending on top of Kathleen in a grave limpid snow.

The next morning the islanders awoke to survey the damage. Aunt Ethel came by Kathleen's house to check on her sister and nephew Jeremy. What she saw when she turned up the cement path was a stunning pattern of light and prisms, suspended in midair, and blanketing the ground. Millions of tiny pieces of glass had been trapped in the layers of cobwebs strung between the trees, and now they all shined so brightly, it blinded her to stare at them.

# The Tiffany Prospect

Rob Duffer

I SHOULD HAVE MOVED MY CAMP WHEN I SAW THEM. I SHOULD NEVER HAVE thrown the football back, never accepted their beer. I should never have let her in my tent. Should have, shouldn't have—it makes no difference now. The burden of memory is knowing what you could have done instead of what you did. What I should have done was get in my car and slam into his pickup truck, push it over the edge into the river, then tear up their campsite under my wheels. No, it's my fault: I should never have believed in hope, in her.

Like I do, I parked my car in what appeared to be the most remote site, the one nearest the river and furthest from the families and their nonsense. Of all the campgrounds in the past six or seven months from the West Coast to the Mississippi, this one was typical of the Midwestern state park: campfires must be contained in a rusted metal band; picnic tables civilize the sites instead of rocks or logs; electrical hookups let the fat and comfy bring their TVs, VCRs, and bug zappers; in the middle of the campgrounds are modern restrooms, with flushing toilets and the choice of hot and cold water. Whereas in the Rockies and the Cascades you get community Dumpsters with locking mechanisms to deter bears, here you get community vending machines with bright lights to advertise . . . culture. Out West, in the national parks—in any park—

you can do some real camping with a thirty-pound pack strapped to your back in the midst of the great outdoors without anyone else around. Back-country camping, they call it. Here it's more like backyard camping—corn or soybean fields instead of mountains or forests. If I could explain the differences between the West and here, maybe my brother, Mark, would understand why I don't ever want to go back home.

The "primitive" sites are perched above where the river runs. Well, rivers don't necessarily run in the Midwest, especially here in Iowa. They meander, they stroll, slow and ignorant like tourists, as if wherever it goes, if it even goes at all, doesn't really matter. Even the fat Mississippi doesn't run; it sways and shifts. My site jutted off from the fork in the path and hid behind a swath of big oak trees, well removed from the other sites. I imagined a sound night's sleep, with the murmur of the river and stars slipping like sand through the fingers of branches above, tapping on my eyelids until sleep comes.

I didn't bother with the tent when I found the site. Instead, I strapped on the little pack and tromped around the shores of the river—I think it's the Volga. A good hike even for the Midwest, varied slopes with dells and natural basins carved in rock.

When I came out of the trees, the path began to circle back to the main campground area. Shafts of sunlight shot over the trees on my left, drawing long shadows over the path and down into the main area. Time to set up camp. This pasty hick with sagging jean shorts ran down the path to catch a football that seemed to have been spit out from the trees atop the ridge, right near my supposedly hidden campsite. The thrower stood between a thin opening of trees atop the ridge. Both of these skinny hicks had their shirts off, with loose, dirty jean shorts that they probably wear driving their "vehicles." The one nearest me had a little blond mustache thin as an eyebrow. Their pickup trucks sat on the ridge, and other people shifted like silhouettes in the falling daylight. Two dogs chased each other, cases of beer waited on the picnic table—all darkened by this brilliant backdrop of open sky and setting sun. This *voooOOHH* comes out of nowhere and I covered my head with my arms, you know, on instinct. The football thunked off the dirt in the path, bounced, then rolled dead in the grass beside me. The guy nearest me was covering his mouth as he laughed, slapping his thigh as he looked up at the other guy. They were throwing it at me.

"Throw it back, ya hippie," the closest guy called, turning around to his little buddy. OK, so I had my hair pulled back in a ponytail because of the sweat, and I haven't shaved in . . . since before Yellowstone or Colorado when



I had the dishwashing job at that diner, but fuck these hicks—I'm not a hippie. So I dropped my pack and grabbed the ball.

I stepped back, got up all the power and control I had, and winged it, perfect form, fingers flushed on the follow-through just like Mark taught me. It took off. He would have been proud. Hick couldn't handle my heater. It smacked his hands and ricocheted into the trees. Should have thrown him a bale of hay. He glared at me and I didn't move. Fuck him—right? He got what he asked for, and then I heard the other guy call down, "Why doncha get the ball, dipshit?" and he started down that narrow opening of trees. "What happened, too close to your damn hands? Man, you suck."

"Fahk yoo, Derby," and he turned and pushed his way through the trees.

Derby, I guess, came down the path with a beer in his hand, grinning. I picked up my bag to leave.

"Hey. Hey, dude . . . yeah, you. You got a good arm, wanna toss it around some? He throws like a woman," he raised his voice over his shoulder. Another "fahk yoo" drawled out of the trees.

He's Jim, but his friends call him Derby. We tossed the pigskin around for a while—it was actually pretty fun—Derby had this terrific arm, could throw it from the fork all the way to the other side of the ridge—must've been sixty yards—and he said he would've started at quarterback his senior year, like he did his junior year, but too much hooky and too much fighting. He had a tattoo of a crucified angel across the top of his back, so that her nailed hands hung down at his shoulders. A barbwire band wrapped around his left biceps that tensed up to the size of a racquetball when he threw—damn stringy southpaw—and little nicks and scars marked up his forearms and hands.

He offered me a beer—I'll never say no to a free beer—and then he introduced me to his friends with, "This here's Tom, Tom from nowhere, and he's staying over there." They glanced at me. There was a couple arguing by their tent and another goofy bastard off in the trees bouncing from a limb, trying to snap it. The girl cutting up a watermelon at the picnic table turned her mouth upward at me, but I couldn't call it a smile, and the guy leaning against her with his legs straddling the bench seat whittled something with a hunting knife. Cooter, off in the trees where he belongs, hucked big sticks and logs to the fringe of the campsite. I regarded his group of friends with the same indifference they gave me, which I appreciated. When you meet older people on the road, they ask you all sorts of questions like they want to know you.

Derby said, "Bottoms up." It went down real good, especially after the hike. They had bottles of Bud, ice cold, and all I had was a few lousy cans. Derby

popped us open another pair with his lighter (even though they were twist-off), and we got to talking about places and how he won't be here much longer because he's gonna go find his dad in Mississippi. His voice blended into the cawing of crows and yipping of dogs when I saw her step out of a tent. She had cargo pants cut off into shorts, athletic, not-muscular legs, and a home-made-looking hemp ankle bracelet with a cheesy yin/yang pendant. A navel ring winked from her little sac of a belly. Beautiful. She walked over to the table and pulled her hair back, her arms all open like a butterfly taking flight, then cinched her hair up in a ponytail. I'll admit it, I haven't been in the company of too many girls my age, but she would have been beautiful in a tent full of beauties. I smiled back and was about to say something, who knows what, 'cause Dylan was crowing away in my head, "She was born in spring/but I was born too late/blame it on . . ."

"Bitch, gimme a beer!" And Cooter came out of the trees and dumped an armload of branches.

"Get it yourself, ya virgin," she said, all cool, over her shoulder, as the others oohed and aahed. She grabbed two beers, handed me one, her shoulders round like door knobs, emerald eyes, full-but-not-fat lower lip . . .

"Whud she say? Whud you say, you little bitch!?! Don't start with me, Tiffany. Ya ho. I'll kick your sorry ass right here, don't care what ol' Derby boy 'll say." And Derby flipped him a beer from the cooler, and they calmed down.

She spat in the dirt (so sexy), rubbed the lip of her bottle with the tank top, and said to Derby, "I think I'm gonna kick the shit out of your bastard friend."

"You know, Cooter, she been takin' them Tai-Can Doo classes . . ."

"Tae kwon do," she corrected.

"Whatever, shut the fuck up," he cut at her. They didn't act like boyfriend/girlfriend, which was encouraging.

"So who's your new friend, Jimbo?" She sucked on her beer.

"Ain't none of your business," and he slung his arm around me and continued in a whisper meant for her to hear, "Don't mind shit-britches here. She just broke up with her boyfriend and now she's hanging with the big time. He had too small a pecker, ain't that right?"

"Fuck you, Jim," she hissed and sat at the table across from the girl and her watermelon.

"So, Tommy boy, you smoke reefer?"

"If you got it, I'll smoke it." Another treat. This kept getting better, beer, weed, Tiffany . . . maybe I shouldn't have been avoiding people so deliberately during my travels. He nodded a smirk, then went over to his truck. I wondered

how old she was and who of them had kids (unlike home, teenage motherhood is more acceptable than teenage abortion); which of them had graduated high school or attended any post-secondary education; who of them most reminded me of my crew and how we used to be.

They were telling stories about past camping excursions where something bizarre or crazy happened, making it sound like camping was all about when something goes wrong, it rains, there's no stakes, coons in the trash, forgot the parking brake, when so-and-so fell from the tree, when Derby brought the rifle, the fireworks, the acid, and they laughed and shook their heads and puffed on their cigarettes. Derby tripped over the dog with the splotchy coat as he walked back. Then he kicked it. It flew into the air like a bucket then skittered under the pickup to hide and whimper. I had that hollow, helpless feeling like I could have done something.

The girls whined and I said he didn't have to do that.

"You mind your own goddamn business," he snapped, pushing me to the side, really just a nudge to the shoulder. I knew he'd scrap, had the frame. When you meet a guy like him, you gotta size him up. I could take him; I was in better shape and had less to lose. Not that I wanted to—I kinda liked him.

"This here is just an appetizer. The main course should be along later," Derby said. He broke out a huge sack. We cleaned it and he rolled it into a big cone. Tiffany stood next to me and our fingers touched when I passed it to her. Incidental contact or something more?

Tiffany went to the hatchback to put in music. The guys shouted for Pantera, Chili Peppers, Kid Rock. Before the first verse of "Box of Rain" by the Dead was sung, Cooter fell to the ground, convulsing and moaning as the guys booed. Then Derby and Bleaker and Cooter started throwing empty beer bottles in her direction. A couple of them hit and shattered right near her feet, causing her to jump from the car. "What the fuck? You fucking assholes, then you pick something out, you fucking pricks," all in one lovely breath. Cooter changed the CD. Tiffany came back over and our fingers touched a few more times. I switched places to see how she received Derby's reaction, to see if they were a thing.

No food, more beer than water, and stoned like I haven't been since freshman year of college. Fucked up. I stared. Crouching over the fire pit and stuffing some leaves and twigs here and there, her passion just to build a fire on her own exceeded her physical beauty, and I fell in love. Then dickhead came up behind her with an armload of branches and dumped them over her head, the logs clunking against the rusted rim and squashing the baby fire. She reeled



away from the pit, then scurried to her feet.

“What the fuck is wrong with you!? Goddammit, Cooter, you’re such an asshole!” and she was pissed for real this time, shoving him hard, which caused Derby to stand up. When she went to punch him again, he grabbed her wrists and started taunting her. I almost wanted him to hit her so I could jump him, play hero.

“Ooh, what’s wrong? Poor baby, can’t get a fire started? I’m gonna show you how . . .,” and she kicked him hard in the shin, so hard he dropped her hand, then Derby intervened just as Cooter’s face swelled with rage. “You better get that little bitch of a sister away from me, Derby. She’s really asking for it.”

“For Pete’s sake, would you two cut it out?” Jenny Lou offered.

Sister? But she’s so good-looking and cool and he’s . . . such an aggressive asshole. She must have been granted access to the cleaner part of the gene pool.

“Jesus, Cooter, you are such a pussy,” she hollered, twisting off a bottle cap and tossing it at him as he walked back from the truck, a bottle of lighter fluid swinging in his hand. “Can’t you start a fire without your precious lighter fluid? Be a man for once in your life.”

He squeezed so much fluid over the fire pit that you could smell it, like it’s on your fingers and you just picked your nose, and he grinned at her and sprayed away. Derby took one last, long drag from his smoke, then flicked it on the fire and BOOM the whole thing exploded into this red-orange tower of fire. Cooter dropped the bottle right by the fire. Derby kicked it away as we all jumped back because it was so damned bright and so damned in our face, and for ten seconds that great orange plume reached up to the bottom of the trees, illuminating everything so that everything else beyond the immediate campsite was totally dark.

I should have gone back to my site then, should have forgotten about them, but Tiffany made the night seem hopeful. Alone at my site I would just drink what I had left and try to drown the memories of home, try to forget about what awaited me if I did go back. In Iowa, as close as I’ve been to a place called home since I thought I knew something about living and dying and being a man, I realized that hope is the bridge between despair and disappointment, and I want to stay on that bridge as long as I can.

The night settled, the girls put on sweatshirts and pants, the guys their T-shirts, the fire relaxed, and Bleaker—that goofy bastard—suggested a drinking game. They were a pretty tight group, and Derby was able to maintain his little bit of control by offering the most to the group, whether it was ridicule, ideas, or drugs and alcohol. In his mind he was the leader; in their mind he was enter-

tainment. Derby made fun of Cooter, his best friend from childhood, for failing a course at the community college. You see it in men of every age, ridiculing anyone who tries to transcend what he was forced to accept. Derby was afraid of getting left behind, afraid their ambition might exceed his own.

When Tiffany got up to go pee in the woods, Jenny Lou addressed Derby and the table fell silent, even Kid Rock seemed to shut up from the car stereo: “She doing OK?”

“She’ll be fine. He’s a piece of shit.” Derby then lit up another smoke. “She’s better without him,” but no one said anything else and I wasn’t about to ask.

Derby narrowed his eyes and kicked his head at me, probably aware of the telling silence she would return to. “So what the fuck is your story? You ain’t said a thing since you been up here.” The others chimed in, and Tiffany returned.

I made the mistake of saying that there isn’t anything to tell, which riled them. Cooter said, “See, I knew he was a little college preppy,” when I said that ever since I dropped out I’d been driving around the country camping and backpacking, picking up jobs when I run out of money and living pretty tight, in my car, in my tent, in seedy motels. Diner dishwasher, landscaper, motel housekeeper, house painter, I answered, and Derby said, “You don’t look like a Me-hee-cano.”

“By yourself, eh?” Tiffany asked, then Kevin asked where I’d been exactly, the first time I can remember him saying a full sentence, a question, even. I told them I’d had a job at a ski resort in the Rockies for the last two months of the season, but I left, and then the West Coast, and fuck California, and the jobs, the national parks, some of the bizarre people who oversee campgrounds and have tree farms or apple orchards. Answering them, I realized it was the first time I was telling anyone what I’d been doing. They would shift and look away, then ask about the size of the bison in Yellowstone or the height of the Redwoods in California or how Mount Saint Helens could have all those wildflowers around all that scarred and barren land—except for Tiffany who stared right at me and didn’t blink. Some people never go too far from home. I didn’t want them to think I was bragging—they acted like my life was a vacation without any problems. Explaining how a sunrise looked and felt from the bottom of the Grand Canyon was as hard as not telling them that it gets lonely, how you find yourself in some new place and the hope that something might happen there to change things, each new place bursting with possibility until it was no longer new, and then the disappointment that would sink in when you realized nothing was different, nothing changed, and that disappointment

compounding the previous one to a new depth. It's not a vacation, it's my life, and I have no friends and no place to go hang out and no place to go back to and no place that I'm going. I didn't tell them that sometimes, when I'm in the middle of a hike and surrounded by all this open space and natural beauty, I feel like shit when I should be feeling great, that it doesn't matter if I live or die because nobody would know the difference anyhow.

Headlights shot through the darkness below and spun through the trees above us. I figured it was the ranger coming to lecture us on quiet hours and alcohol. Instead, everyone jumped up and greeted the beat-up station wagon. A big, beef-bred, thick-necked guy got out and a girl, evidently Derby's girl, good-looking enough despite the ugly brown Travel Center uniform, hugged and high-fived the others. I grabbed a couple beers and headed over to my site.

The new calmness and change of scenery proved my drunkenness. Still trying to get my tent up, which usually takes two minutes, I heard the music cut out and the pickup growl to life. I needed water, needed food. Before I could finish or grab an apple, a shadow emerged from the trees. Tiffany. With her hands by her side and her neck bent slightly, she walked slow and uneasy towards me, on the tightrope of seduction, I hoped.

"Just gonna disappear like that?" she stopped at the other edge of the tarp.

"Hi," I smiled.

"You're one of those guys," she narrowed her eyes and smirked.

"No, I gotta set up my tent and get a fire going before I'm too messed up."

Behind her, in the small clearing, the pickup rumbled to a stop. Derby leaned out the window, laying on the horn. "C'mon, this train's leaving."

She turned back to me. "Let's go. We're going to the caves."

"I really gotta get this up, gotta eat something," but before I could finish she had grabbed my hand, assuring me that she'd help me set it up when we got back.

*Nothing to lose so why not?*

We bounced along the road in the back of the pickup, Tiffany sitting across from me, fighting with Cooter, Jenny Lou, and Kevin all cuddling in the corner, Bleaker standing up and banging on the roof. Fat Karl passed a bottle of Jack through the window and by the time it got to me the truck spun into a stop.

The cave was a gaping mouth in the side of a small bluff topped with trees. The modern-day hieroglyphics of graffiti, lined the wet walls. They made a fire at the entrance, and the guys lined up cans and bottles towards the back of it to shoot with Derby's .22. The crack echoed over the shattering glass, getting lost over my shoulders to the river, where I sat. A crescent moon, a white cut



in the dark, hovered over the trees on the opposite bank.

"You're sitting in my favorite seat," Tiffany sat down beside me. "I like coming up here to watch the sunrise sometimes." She lit a joint and passed it to me. The other folks were starting to trip on the mushrooms that Fat Karl brought. In the truck, when everyone had dug their hand into the bag, I waited on Tiffany. She declined and so did I. "I mean, it's no Grand Canyon or anything, but it's nice enough."

"It is."

"You don't say much."

"I didn't notice." I looked out at the moon's reflection in the river and tried to think of something to ask, but it all sounded stupid.

"Why are you here?" She turned to me.

"I like camping."

"What are you gonna do when it gets cold?"

"I don't know. Head south. Find a job, maybe. I've always wanted to go to Mexico. Why you asking so many questions?" I said it playfully, not trying to be a dick.

"I don't know, shit," she looked away, offended. "I'm just sick of home. I want to know what it's like, is all."

"Sorry. I'll tell you anything you want to know."

"OK. Why are you here, I mean outside of Acreville, Iowa? You said you've been all over the States, so how'd you end up here?"

I told her how my brother and sister need me to go back where I spent the first eighteen years of my life so they could legally sell the house. If it weren't for them, I would never go back, would never have met any of these assholes from Acreville.

"Why are they selling it?"

"Too much of a burden on my brother," I chugged my beer. She waited, then shifted a little closer. I leaned my arms back to try and hug her without touching her. It was more than I'd told anyone, and she must've suspected something. I didn't tell her that my dad is sick now, according to my brother, and I'm trying to do the right thing but I'm still pissed at him because he thinks he's excused for coming back into our lives to cry out his guilt over her dying body and now I should feel for him, reconcile with him, because, well, as my brother, the alarmist, puts it, "We could be orphans," so we get stuck with the one that we never needed anyway. You don't tell people this. When people know too much it gets awkward and they act like you're damaged and fragile, and your friends can't even talk to you, they just stare at you and say they know

what you're feeling and they're sorry, but they have no idea what they're talking about and you smell their bullshit so much more clearly now, and you're damaged and they have to treat you special and make you feel even worse. When you're feeling pitiful, there is nothing worse than receiving more pity. That part of my life is over.

"When did you leave?"

"I dropped out of college last Christmas, and I been traveling around since then." I didn't want to talk about me and I wanted to know how old this chick was and why she was suddenly in my business and why she kept asking questions and making me feel uncomfortable. "What about you, you in college?" Please tell me you're not in high school, I thought.

"No. My mom depends on me to watch my half-sisters while she works second shift at the plant. I could go, I have the marks but . . . I don't know." She picked at her ankle bracelet, her shoulders sloping in and uncomfortable. Talking about home sucks.

"You still smell good," I said, breathing in the berry shampoo in her hair. "How do you do it?"

She looked back at me and smiled, then rubbed her hands together. I got the cue and rubbed her arms and shoulders. I should've kissed her right then. But she turned around and asked, "Why don't you wanna go home?"

"Damn, girl, you're relentless."

"Don't you get lonely?"

"Hell, no. People aren't worth it. What happened with your boyfriend?"

She pulled herself away from me and started flicking pebbles into the water. This boyfriend of "fourteen months, six days" had cheated on her with her best friend. Derby had found Derek (the boyfriend) kissing up on this girl by a shed in someone's yard who was having a party. Derby had just come back from a month in rehab to kick his meth habit, which he'd stayed away from. She said he'd go back or end up dead. "The embarrassing thing, more than my bitch friend, was that Jim, with his friends, beat the shit out of Derek. It started this whole thing between the two groups of friends and everyone kept asking how'd it happen, what happened, and everyone in the whole damn town knew that I was the sucker."

"So big brother was sticking up for you?"

"Whatever. He was sticking up for his image. He's gotta look cool or else. And now I have to tag around with them because my friends all took *her* side because of what Jim did. It's so stupid. I can't wait to get outta here."

"Come with me," I said, surprising myself. It just popped out there, but I

didn't retreat. This whole time I'd been wondering about her. Unlike most nights when I put myself to sleep, imagining a girl naked and on top, I imagined Tiffany in the passenger seat of my car, her bare feet dangling out the window and one arm slung over the bench seat with a hand on my shoulder. The sun would be shining.

She glanced back at me, smiled, then a bottle shattered behind us. Scared the hell out of both of us. Derby, Cooter, and Karl were about twenty feet behind us, standing in front of the fire. "We're leaving," Derby said and turned away. Everyone else, even the girls, stood and stared for a second. Cooter glared at me. I ignored him. They were probably peaking and confused by their own footsteps.

On the ride home the music was loud and no one was talking. Karl sat across from me, cramping me into a ball so that my legs fell asleep, and Tiffany sat up front between Derby and his girl, Becky.

They dropped me off at my site. And as hopeful as the night had been it ended as quick as that. I open myself up and she says nothing. Fuck it, I thought, and ate out of the can of beans. I'm better off this way. I made a fire. Music blared from their site, someone turned it down, yelled, "Dipshit," and I tried not thinking about her. I pitched the tent and passed out against the log with a beer in my lap.

I came to and saw something in front of me, blocking the embers of the small fire. Then something swooshed in front of my face; I felt the breeze of its tail, like some giant, black, shapeless bird, blotting out anything else in my field of vision, and it scared the shit out of me; my shorts were wet and I thought I'd peed my pants, and my back slammed against the log and the bottle rolled off my lap. Then I heard laughter. She tried apologizing through her giggling. I was quiet, dazed, and confused. We faced each other. She bit her lip to stop laughing at me.

"Uhh, you scared me," I said and pushed her shoulder.

"I know. Sorry." She dropped her eyes and rubbed her foot on her ankle. "I didn't mean to wake you." She held a pillow to her chest.

"That's all right. I was dreaming about you." Yeah, sure I was.

"Oooh," she purred and leaned into me.

Our teeth hit and she giggled. I cupped my hands around her face and said let's try again. Our lips met perfectly, making that smack sound, and our tongues touched and our breath was rotten, but she felt so good and then I felt her tongue-ring, and I thought I could love this girl, I could drink her nectar, and we kept kissing, and she dragged her teeth over my tongue. Then she



pulled away from me.

The little bit of fire reflected in her green eyes and bronze skin, and she was beautiful, and I felt wanted.

"Were you serious about what you said?"

"Yeah," and maybe I was. Maybe I really did think that she could make a difference, that we would drive off into the sunrise together and never look in the rearview mirror. I haven't kissed a girl since the day before Christmas. My best friend's girlfriend stayed at our house after campus closed because she lived in the dorms and had one more test. I worked, came home, and Lisa was still up. She had a bottle of wine, no more studying, and said she was worried about me, that I never said anything about what happened, and she told me about her dad dying when she was young and what it's like, and we all knew it but she never talked about it, and she told me how it doesn't go away, that it's not something you get over—it's something that you accept. I tried talking, but tears came out instead, tears for the first time. She held me and I kissed her and we ended up having sex and she cried afterward and in the morning she was gone and I had ruined another friendship. Add that to the girl, the one girl I may have loved, but I didn't want her to go down with me and have to deal with my broken ass. She tried to be there for me, and I pushed her away and I lost her, too.

"Your friends seem pretty protective of you. I was waiting for Cooter to throw a punch."

"Fuck Cooter. He's an idiot." She went silent and I asked about him.

She sighed, I coaxed, she started, "One time, about a year ago, he tried to kiss me when he was drunk, said he loved me and everything. He acts like he doesn't remember because if Jim found out he'd never talk to him again, which, for Cooter, would be worse than any ass-whupping. So now he's an asshole to me."

"Damn. You should come with me."

"I don't even know you."

"Get to know me. Spend the night and see how you feel in the morning. We'll go to a place without time, where we choose our way and don't have to worry about anyone bothering us." She kissed me before I could finish. We inched our way to the tent. She flipped the pillow into a corner and I wanted her all over me, inside me, filling me. Rubbing her thigh with my left hand, kissing her neck, her ear, I started saying stupid shit like, "I missed you" and "I know what I'm looking for," while my hand slid up her thigh and her hand trickled down to my shorts but then she jerked away.

"Ohhh," in this baby-babble voice, "your shorts are all wet. Did you have an accident? Poor thing, that might be my fault. Whatever can I do to make it up to you . . ." and I shrugged my shoulders and licked my lips, because I wasn't about to interrupt it with one of my classic fuck-ups. She continued, ". . . hmmm," clucking that dumbbell of a tongue-ring against her teeth and beginning to rub and fumble with the button. "Where will we go?"

"Where doesn't matter. Only *who* does."

Maybe I meant it. Maybe it was my dick speaking. I gazed through the diamond-shaped mesh window, out at those thin-fingered tree branches, those twinkling stitch holes in that black blanket of a sky, and the soft, wet warmth of her tongue over and around and up and down on me. Not much later, I started to kiss her belly, but she tugged on my ear lobe and said that now isn't the right time and I knew what she meant.

I hate to admit this, especially now, but when she softened into the cradle of my chest with her left hand around my neck and her breath rustling the hairs between my nipples, there hadn't been a comparable feeling to that in . . . in . . . in forever. No Grand Canyon, no Continental Divide, no meteor shower, no dive into the ocean near the seals—none of those could compare with the simple warmth I felt with her lying next to me in my tent, in my home. And maybe that was all I'd been looking for in the past year. Someone to know me, to not know my past, and start over with me.

"Tom." It was weird to hear my name; I repositioned my head to look at her eyes. She said nothing more.

"Tiffany Derbinski, you're the most beautiful thing I've come across in this whole country." I pulled the bag over both of us and kissed her on the lips, rubbing her shoulders and back when she started talking about all the places she wanted to see. Her excitement excited me, thinking that it'd be good to have someone to share things with, like expenses and cooking and all the other stuff, too, and I waited and watched as her breathing became snoring, and we were so beautiful, so innocent, so needy in our sleep. I passed out.

Just like last time, I had no idea how long I was out before the sound of rain woke me. I saw the stars sparkling through the little window. Tiffany leaned on an elbow, her eyebrows curled into question marks. A light stream tapped up and down on the nylon walls, followed by the *s* sounds of whispering. She arched forward when we heard snickering, "Jiiim . . ." I got to my knees, ready to explode, making sure, because it sounded like pissing, some cocksuckers pissing on my tent, my house, and she unzipped the door, darkness everywhere, especially in the tent, and the trickle ran overhead and across the

mesh window and that's when I smelled it, drops seeping through the window onto my thigh and my sleeping bag.

"LIGHTER FLUID!" I screamed, just as Tiffany squeezed halfway out the door with a "What the fuck are you doing?" to whoever was out there. She yelled something and maybe they laughed, who knew, because I scrambled for my keys and backpack to haul them out the door, but before I could a horrible shriek ripped through the tent. I paused and heard this *ppft . . . wwhhHHOOOOOMPPPPPP*, like a gas grill being started, and still halfway inside the tent, a blue-yellow hand of fire turned the darkness to brilliance in the window, shadows rippling on the tent wall, and Tiffany outside screaming so loud that it rang in my ears. Outside a bottle shattered. Must've been the Jack. I flung myself out and saw her, the backside of her, her shorts and tank top, lunging as if she was pushing a car into Jim, and behind me the tip of the tent erupted, the thin walls shimmering with fire. My house was burning. I crawled forward with my face pushed back by the heat. Fumbling, grasping for anything, sleeping bag, air mattress, clothes—her sweatshirt, my shoes—I tossed those out but couldn't reach the backpack. Slithering on my stomach, gagging on the smoke, at the smell of burning plastic, I yanked out the pack and stumbled to my knees, crouching, eyes burning. They moved like shadows. Tiffany punched him with the undersides of her fists, kicking him, and that fucker just stood there with his arms by his side. Cooter came out of nowhere, started dancing around them, cursing, hollering, bouncing like a joker. If I'd had my breath, I would've charged him then.

My vision cleared, and Tiffany's hysteria didn't sound as sharp. Jim's forehead was squished down. "Don't you ever hit me," his eyes slanted into swords, tricking his face into nothing less than evil . . . rage . . . mashing down his face, teeth bared. "YOU," his right arm cocked back, "FUCKING, get up, man, c'mon, get up, WHORE," and he punched her in the face, making a sound like a stone dropped onto moist ground; her body went limp as her head bounced dead onto the ground. Cooter gaped at Jim, then Tiffany, and a smile twisted over Jim's face, but his eyes, with the dim glow of the fire, were confused. I charged and tackled him textbook perfect—my shoulder driving into his diaphragm with my head under his elbow. His body weighed nothing with my rage. Driving him up and back as his fists pummeled my shoulders, I lost my balance but kept the legs pumping and drove him into the ground with all my weight, felt the light and sharp *crkk*, and I knew by how he stiffened that he'd lost his breath. He pushed and kicked, his body begging for air; he began shrinking and I began growing, my back expanding like wings. I pinned his



right arm under my knee, bucking, groaning, his left arm flailing, slapping me, trying to poke my eyes, but I had the drop on him. BAM! ONE, TWO, THREE times I jacked him in the face, with the last one really getting him. With my left hand wrapped around my right wrist, I raised up and slammed my forearm and elbow into his face. Something popped. The blood spurted from his nose and mouth. At the sight of that blood and the power charging through my body, I wanted to kill him, I wanted to exterminate the threat, for my tent, for Tiffany, for me, for my mom, for everything fucked up and wrong, and all that hatred and frustration shot out of my body. His eyes rolled in and out of his eyelids, one more gasp, and I locked my arms in that same position. I wanted it, wanted him limp and motionless. Something hit me in the back and sent me reeling, no breath, and the punches and kicking and beating me with something, I couldn't tell, 'cause I was trying to scurry away. A fist whizzed by my face, then connected at my head, but not so good, and now he got on me, our arms all locked up and Cooter's face so close to mine—his spit in my eyes—that I bit his cheek; he yanked back before I got anything, but it let me get away.

"STOP IT GOD STOP YOU FUCKING ASSHOLES GODDAMMIT-STOPIT!" Tiffany shouted out her chorus. It was a sloppy fight, the punches weren't really landing; we went down and he bucked me off, skidding into the gravel, tearing open the palms of my hands, and then I got flattened to the ground and lost my breath. They hoisted me up and Cooter held me in a head-lock. Something drubbed away at the side of my head, this hollow sound and hollow pain, and I got weary, and then Derby, his shirt ripped and bloody, appeared before me and started with the body blows and I tried wrestling free, but each movement stung my neck, and Tiffany was crying and they were cursing and Derby reached into his back pocket and flashed a knife as Cooter screamed in my ear, "Motherfucker bit me, gonna DIE, motherFUCKER," and I felt his teeth grazing my ear, but I flinched my neck enough to make me dizzy, breathless. Over Derby's shoulder the pack of guys ran around the swath of trees from the path yelling, "Jim," and Kevin grabbed Derby from behind, the big guy, too, and they picked him up as he hollered and slashed the air. I tumbled to the ground and the girls stood around Tiffany, holding her as she cried, everyone buzzed around, and my position from the ground distorted it even more.

A pale yellow light circled overhead, then skidded over pebbles and a roaring engine, and I staggered to my feet, crawling forward, using my hands to push me upward, but I fell on my shoulder only to bounce up again.

"You all cut this shit out right now, ya HEAR!" and I turned back and

watched the smoldering tent crumple, then saw all the shit, all of my shit, strewn between the ranger's truck and my tent.

My right eye was swollen shut, and I stood below everyone, the ranger's fender a few feet from my left arm. His pajama bottoms sagged over his waistband. On the other side of the fire pit, closest to my car, Jenny Lou and Becky supported Tiffany, with my blanket wrapped over her shoulders. Between the fire pit and the log, to the right of the girls, standing, panting, holding his cheek, chewing on his lip, Cooter glared at me, with Bleaker gripping his arm. Derby paced to my right, to the right of everyone else, to the right of what's left of the tent, Kevin and Karl flanking him and eyeing one another; Derby wouldn't look anywhere but down, cursing quietly. In the middle, my stuff—my shoes, the backpack, the sleeping bag, some beer cans, and when the ranger continued, I glanced over at Derby and could tell his nose was broken, slid over onto the side of his face, and I felt a proud, evil smile curl over my lips and reopen a cut.

"HERE's what's gonna happen before I call the POLICE . . ." and he surveyed the situation, jaws clenched. "Whoever's stuff this is . . ." Jenny Lou retrieved Tiffany's sweatshirt, and I went for my backpack, got the car keys, and walked by the ranger. He grabbed my elbow, "Hold on there . . ."

"Get your hands off me," I hissed and tore my arm away.

"What happened here? I'm talking to you, what the HELL HAPPENED HERE?! You better tell me or y'all be spending the night in town. Jail. Y'all together. Got it? So start talking." I felt their eyes on me as I gathered my stuff. Tiffany stopped crying, and Derby stopped pacing.

"You best stop what you're doing and start explaining. You, yeah you, right here, right now." My eye started to throb really hard and a weariness rushed over me, so much that I felt like collapsing, just sitting down and being left alone, because I was suddenly so exhausted, every part of me, every aching breath, aching with a pain so physical and great that it no longer felt like pain, just felt like exhaustion, a wooden puppet ready to crumble cause there's no hand to support me.

"Why don't you ask someone else?" I said over my shoulder.

"Because I'm asking you. This is your site, your car, your Illinois plates? And I got no money for this here site."

"Well, what's it look like happened, man?" I stuffed the bag under my arm. "There was an accident."

"This ain't no accident. Cut the bullshit. What's going on here, son?" and I went over to the tent, Kevin standing between Derby and me. The flames

didn't really catch into the fabric but the poles appeared to be melted into the slips along the wall, and the plastic clips and ties were all melted or warped. Nothing to salvage. And it backed me into a corner. I just had my car. What happened? This guy wanted to know what happened when I didn't even know what the hell was going on, what was going to happen, how my tent was a melted mess and I didn't have any money, and I had to go but had nowhere to go and nowhere to stay except in my fucking car.

"What happened is . . . what happened is . . . I don't know, man. She's his sister. And she gave me head and he got jealous because he's a latent homosexual, him and his buddy there, and they both got jealous because they wanted to be the ones sucking cock . . ."

One of them threatened my life in a low, angry voice before Tiffany roared, "You fucking asshole!" and ran over to me by the car, about to dump the last bit of salvageable shit. "You take me with you, you said to come with you," and she hit me a couple of times in the chest, strong little bitch, no tears but she turned ugly and broken and vulnerable and someone I wouldn't want to be around anyway. But part of me wanted to reach out and feel her in my arms again, take her away and go. Instead I got pissed at her, at the scene, at her acting like I owed her something. Fuck her and fuck everyone, we're all alone and that's how it is.

"Get away from me. Now," and I turned abruptly toward the car, away from her outstretched hand, "I ain't taking you anywhere. You belong here with these . . . these fucking people," and I glared at all of them, lost control of my words and couldn't say anything. The alcohol and lack of sleep, the impossible future, my life. It was my life, and in that one moment backing away from her and around my car, with all of them in the background, all that unspeakable shit that lay hidden inside my head keeping me up every night, the endlessness and hopelessness of not being able to run away anymore, that nothing had gotten better, that the hole had gotten deeper—I wanted her so much to come with me. The bridge was getting longer and I was so tired of myself. All these things that I can articulate now, all the emotions came crashing together and I screamed, "Get the fuck away from me, all of you," and the ranger reached out to hold me as Tiffany took a step back. I batted away his arms and—I hate to admit this, to write it even to you who sees only my eyes—the hot flush of tears burst out of me. I broke down and cried, *cried*, and Derby laughed.

I ducked into the car and started it without looking at anyone or anything but saw in the side mirror the ranger's truck blocking the only way out, and my arms began to tremble so much that the steering wheel started shaking and



I slammed my fist down into the wheel, unintentionally honking the horn. Then a determination cooled over me, calmed me, so I put it back and forth into drive, reverse, until I could squeeze between his truck and the trees, the branches scraping the passenger's side of the car. I gunned it onto the path and circled above the other campsites. An unusual bustle lit up those sites that should have been dark and still, shadows of people in front of their tents or RV's with lanterns and flashlights highlighting me as I made my way out.

On the road the embarrassment from crying like that almost made me cry again but it turned to anger. Maybe the ranger would call the cops; he'd got my plates. When I reached Route 150 I went north instead of south and intersected with another, smaller road until I noticed an off road to the left and cut down there about a mile or so and found a good place to tuck the car into some brush in case they were chasing me. Now it didn't really make any sense that they would chase me; I didn't do anything wrong, but I hid like an escapee. I remember that rich, dark blue of the sky before sunup, where the blackness was being sucked out by whatever lay beyond the dark sky, and then I grabbed my bag from the back seat and crashed.

Until some knuckles rapping on my window woke me to this blinding, dizzying daylight. I'm not sure what the old man in overalls said or even looked like; all I can remember is that old, beaten, brown hat and him calling me "pardner" after he asked if I needed any help with my flat tire. Pissed from the previous night and being awoken to such news, I barked "No," took out the keys, checked the rearview mirror for a swollen face, then realized how uneven the ground was. But he was gone, in that short little time, no trace of him at all, as if he had ridden the dust horses stirred up by the breeze, because all that remained was a dusty haze disappearing over the road. My body ached and I wondered if he was real. I used a rock and some books to leverage the car evenly and managed, after over an hour and a half, to get the tire changed and get off that deserted road.

All I have left is my car. The Mississippi is beneath me, and on the other side is home and consequence and sorrow and my brother and sister, my only friends, and they probably hate me, too. Maybe it'd make a good home for me at the bottom of the river. I don't want to cross any more bridges. I'm so sick of hoping, sick of fighting what I can't control, and so fucking sick of trying to prove to myself that I don't need anyone, that I'm fine, because I'm not and this feeling is getting worse, bigger, and it's not going to change. I miss her. I miss my mom.

# The Stomach

Tina Spielman

ONE MORNING I WOKE UP A FEW SECONDS BEFORE THE ALARM, GRABBED MY glasses, and leaned over to wake my lover up, only to find her stomach, instead of inside the strength of her skin, exposed outwardly above her navel. The stomach, it seemed, had moved the blanket away as it exited her body and was covered in the inward gook of veins, arteries, and strange hard knobs that poked out beneath it. Sarah was already awake. Her eyes, covered in sleep, stared down at the mess.

“It’s my stomach,” she said, her voice full of surprise.

“Yes,” I whispered and brought my head in closer for a better look. The membranes glistened in the sunlight streaming through the window over our heads, revealing bits of mucus and tissue. It was exactly what I thought it would look like, a stomach reversed. A pulsating ball of flesh wound up in twine. I pushed my fingers slightly into the sac. It gave beneath the pressure, and Sarah released a sound.

“It doesn’t hurt, just feels strange.” She sat as far back on the bed as possible to escape her own stomach. Her brows moved together in a wince as I balanced the bottom of the organ in the palm of my hand. It felt soft and gushy—and then a fragment of pizza crust fell onto the sheets. I thought we

should feed it, thought maybe the stomach would respond after ingesting food. Maybe this is what severe hunger does to a person.

I made some coffee and took it and pieces of toast in on a tray with different flavors of jam. I hoped that the stomach might react if given a choice. And when I walked into the room, the organ emitted a huge growl, making the entire thing hum and vibrate in anticipation. Sarah had absentmindedly woven the lining into a tie that hung down past her waist, a braid of reds and blues. Her face was imprinted with pillow creases. I placed the toast on her tongue and watched in awe as the food took a couple seconds to travel into the stomach. It didn't seem to bother things that the mass was outside instead of in, and the crumbs, now soaked in saliva, funneled in from the stomach down what seemed to be a slide. The stomach breathed a murmur of pleasure, and Sarah smiled. She quickly finished off the entire breakfast, then lay sprawled out in the middle of the bed as the stomach bobbed around on top of her. I walked up, kneeling above her, pushing the bangs back from her face.

"Has this ever happened before?" I asked. Sarah shook her head no.

"Are you sure? Not with any other guy?"

"Don't you think I would have told you?" she said.

I didn't call the doctor or her mother or her boss with the tight lips and one eyebrow. There didn't seem to be any alarm, only an organ. The night before, we had gone for a walk. Sarah said she was disappearing, at least that's what it felt like with me. For the past several months, she had looked into my eyes for her reflection and had seen nothing. I kissed her bottom lip only outside of the grocery store. Pretended this was something I understood. Before I left for work Sarah was still there, stranded as a beached whale. Her arms flailed out, and next to her I placed a stack of magazines and water. This time I didn't go into the room but peeked my head in and waved. Sarah's mouth moved in a strained smile, and the stomach gave a little bounce.

Over the next week my lover's condition worsened. Not only was the stomach still alive and beating outside her torso, but other body parts too had wriggled their way to reach the oxygen outside. Her intestine, pale and packed with veins, had snaked out through a small hole under her stomach. The intestine had a dark lining beneath its body, and its length grew daily. Also present were the liver, gray and weathered; a kidney, which I was amazed looked much like a bean; and small fleshy substances were sprinkled randomly around her body. Our bed became cluttered with Sarah's body parts, and when I tried sleeping next to her, the intestine would fondle my ear or leave a snail trail of residue on my chin. So I took to sleeping on the couch in the living room. The



bedroom seemed full to occupancy and didn't need another body of competing parts. Sarah was held prisoner by her body, pegged down by the intestine that would periodically hold her arms down, fastened at her sides. I watched helplessly, holding a cup of coffee in the doorway, as the body part moved over her abdomen, fastening and releasing like a seat belt.

We didn't talk anymore. I left food at the foot of her bed and tried not to listen to the growls emanating from her insides. We became accustomed to waving. The stomach and other parts didn't seem to like when I was around. They would vibrate, and the tissues around them became inflamed. And after a while I stopped going in entirely. They had declared war upon Sarah, and she became covered by innards. She didn't mind that much, and from what I could see, my lover had enjoyed her free time away from work. She knitted long scarves. Sarah read every word of advice from columns. She practiced molding her hair into various styles. One day, pigtails, the next it would be gathered up on the top of her head like a ballerina's. I hurried by her door that was mostly kept closed on my account. I couldn't recognize her because the exiting of body parts seemed to have changed the expressions on her face. My lover's eyes were dulled, her nose runny, cheeks pale in comparison to the bright red bulbs moving across her stomach. She would occasionally call me into the room bearing a brownie or some eggs, and I could see her eyes mute over.

When I brought Sarah a plate full of carrot cake, I decided to stay for a while. It had been so long since we had touched, I began to forget the way her skin moved beneath my grasp. I placed the plate on her chest and moved my face down Sarah's body, pushing the blankets back with my arms until I came face to face with the stomach. She had just eaten spaghetti, and small strings of limp noodle draped around the organ. I looked at the stomach smack in its center, and it gurgled and swung softly from its flesh support. It was daring me. Mocking me. The stomach had taken over my lover, my bed, the space where I used to hold her against my waist where the skin felt like tissue paper. As I stared at the stomach, my fingers began to weave themselves into a fist. I thought that maybe if I hit hard enough, quick enough, the force would send the stomach back inside Sarah, and the holes it made would close up as neatly as the licked part of an envelope. When I punched out, watching the imprint of my knuckles on its veiny surface and heard Sarah screaming from the impact, I had the feeling that I had lost. I leaned back onto the bed as Sarah's hands moved down to console the body part.

"Why did you do that?" she asked, her voice shaky.

I wiped the mucus clinging to my hand onto my leg and noticed the

molded formation of my fist still embedded in the stomach's surface.

"To see if you were still there," I said.

I raised my palm into the air, my white flag of surrender, while laying my head on her intestine which, when coiled python-style into a ball, provided the comfort of a pillow.

One day I came home from work to find Sarah on the couch. It was the first time she had ventured outside the room besides going to the bathroom, and she was covered in something knitted. She had painted makeup onto her face, brushed on blush to compensate for her pallid skin. And the wrap looked like something she had made herself, a light blue shawl draped over the lower half of her body. My lover was smiling. She looked half normal under that blanket. And for a second, I thought that maybe things could be all right.

"I made this today," she said, taking my hand into hers, gesturing to the knit shawl covering her body.

"Thank you," I said. "It was getting hard to look at you."

She nodded in agreement.

I sat down next to her on the couch and wrapped my arms around her shoulders. It felt good to be close to her again, to smell her skin saturated by soap and not mucus. I loved her long lashes, the texture of her face. We started kissing, and I almost forgot the condition she was in, the blanket so soft and comforting, and I positioned her body on top of mine. I was staring up into Sarah's face, brushing the stray hairs away and kissing her fingers, when the stomach noticed. The body parts didn't like being constrained by the shawl and revolted against the covering in a team effort. Stomach fluids soaked the fabric, then used their acid to dissolve it. The intestine used its force to poke holes through, and the stomach coated the shawl in a wet film. I was covered by my lover's insides. Sarah started crying, and I ran into the bathroom to wipe off each section of broken tissue that covered my body in scales. I heard my lover stomp back into the bedroom and the door close behind her in defeat; a trail of fluid dragged on the floor behind her.

The next day Sarah's bags were packed. They were placed next to the door, and she stood next to them. It looked as though some of the body parts had gone back inside. No longer was the intestine wrapped around her body. There was also an absence of the unmarked knobs and veins. But the stomach was still there, bustling and shaking. It seemed frenzied in anticipation.

"Where are you going?" I said. "It looks like you are getting better."

I placed my briefcase on the ground and walked over to hold her. The stomach growled in front of me, telling me to stay back. My lover looked at

me, her eyes welling with tears. She took a breath.

“Maybe something else will want me. I could get some cats or learn to care for birds. Or maybe I will move to Florida. There has to be a scientist or a doctor who would want me. They could study me. Appreciate me for what I’ve become. I will find a doctor. Yes.”

I tried to hold her back, my hands gripped strongly over her shoulder blades. I told her things that might somehow make an imprint like my fist did upon her stomach. She shook me free in one intense movement, all the while the stomach yelping. And I watched from the window of our apartment as Sarah waddled down the street, a suitcase in each hand, with the stomach wrapped around her chest like an infant, capturing the sun in a warm orange glow.



# Sweet Pea

Lisa Redmond

LOLLIE SAMSON STOOD OVER THE SINK PEELING WHITE POTATOES. THERE WAS a twenty-pound sack at her feet, and each time she sheared the skin from one, she reached down for another. She'd place the potato firmly within the palm of her left hand, then begin to run the knife along its length, the potato skins falling into the sink below. The starch from the potatoes covered her hands and made it look as though she were wearing sheer white gloves.

On one side of the counter sat a plate holding a small hill of raw chicken, already seasoned. Behind her on the stove, a skillet full of frying chicken bubbled and emitted a soft sizzle, the only sizzle you get when you fry over a reasonable flame. The house was filled with the sweet, tender, salty, and seasoned smell of frying chicken.

Suddenly she dropped the last potato on top of a pile that sat in the sink, grabbed the dishtowel, and wiped her hands as she went to the bottom of the staircase.

"Bonita," she called, then paused, one foot resting on the bottom step. "Bonita!" she called again, more urgency this time.

Her hands were raw from the starchy potatoes, and her fingers ached from pressing the knife into angles delicate enough to remove the skin and leave the potato.

She heard three heavy footsteps pounding on the floor above her and the

pop of the door pulling from the jamb, then vibrating from the force that had jerked it open.

“What!”

“Girl, don’t you ‘what’ me,” she called up, her hand now resting on her hip. “Get down here in this kitchen. Being on punishment don’t mean being on vacation,” she said and began walking back into the kitchen.

The heavy footsteps continued from the upstairs hall to the stairway, each footfall heavy and intent on sending a message.

“And stop stompin’ on ’nem stairs,” she yelled over her shoulder, then paused to make sure that her daughter did as she’d said.

Bonita stopped halfway down the stairs. In her heart she wanted to stomp down one more step. She wanted to defy her mother. But mingled with the spirit of defiance was the dread of any further punishment. So, with tears welling in her eyes, she made her next step soft and compliant.

At about this same time yesterday, Bonita was leaving school with Qwame, her boyfriend. She’d promised him that they would “do it,” that they would make love. Qwame said that they could go to his cousin Demetrius’s house; they could use his bedroom. But that place was too raw, too messy, too funky. The feel of him trying to press himself inside her felt as if she was being broken in half. It didn’t feel right, so she ran.

She ran away from Qwame and out of the house. She ran through the streets, past the guys playing basketball, their utterances and arguments scattered in the wake of her longing for home. She passed a group of delinquents splayed out on a front porch, shoulders hunched against the wind, glowing tips of cigarettes brightening the night.

She ran, but she arrived home much later than usual. It was 8:00P.M. As she entered the front door of her house, her parents were huddled together in front of the table where the telephone sat. Her father held the receiver suspended halfway between the base of the phone and his ear. The worried creases of their foreheads turned smooth and a look of relief replaced the worry, momentarily. Bonita wanted to hug them and hold them and tell them all about what had happened. She wanted to, until the final metamorphosis of their faces revealed the jagged, stone faces of anger.

“Daddy,” she’d called out to him, but he refused to look at her. He walked past her as if she weren’t there. He marched up the stairs and into his bedroom at the end of the hall. Bonita waited expectantly for the slamming of the door, but instead she heard a benign click as the door gently met the jamb. Then she heard the creaking and moaning of bedsprings as her father crawled across the

bed and lay down. He believed the worst about her, she thought. He had come to believe that she was beyond redemption. The whuppings of the past didn't seem quite as harsh to her as the silence of this moment.

So today she believed herself to be on punishment, even though her parents hadn't spoken a word. She had been content to remain in her room all day until her mother called upstairs to her.

After Bonita made it down the stairs she appeared at the kitchen door like a shadow, her chin tucked into the neck of her sweater, only a slice of her body visible to her mother's glare.

"Sit down and start peelin' these potatoes," Lollie said, pushing the twenty-pound bag over to where she wanted Bonita to sit. She shoved the bag with one foot, till it rested against the leg of the kitchen table.

Bonita plopped down in the chair, with her legs stretched wide open, the way her older brothers sat, as if she had just mounted a horse. She let her arms drop into her lap and stared at the bag of potatoes like it was a pile of shit.

When her mom turned around to place a knife on the table for her to use, she looked down at her daughter. She was wearing a pair of jeans and a navy blue turtleneck sweater. The new curves of her body seemed to be pressing against the fabric of her old clothes. Her breasts looked like navy-colored tangerines, and the seams of her jeans seemed to be whining for mercy.

As she looked at Bonita she remembered the round baby face that used to be there. She remembered the child that actually liked helping her mother in the kitchen. She remembered the roundish face, until Bonita looked up from the sack of potatoes, her forehead wrinkled with anger. Then she saw the oval-shaped face of a young woman. Her once-fat caramel-colored cheeks looked as if they had been sculpted, and the nose that had been small as a pea her entire childhood had now peaked and begun to rise from her face with such elegance that for a moment she didn't know who her daughter was. Her baby fat had melted into curves. She was turning into a lady, and here she sat with her legs gaping open like a tomboy's. Lollie turned quickly away from admiring her daughter and back to the sink full of dishes.

"Close yo' legs, girl. What you tryin' to do, take a picture?" she said.

Bonita slowly moved her legs together as if her joints were made of quick-drying cement. That saying was what her mother always said when she or one of her sisters sat wide-legged, especially when they were wearing dresses. It was like she was saying that their little vaginas were actual camera lenses, and, with their legs opened, they were aiming to take a picture of somebody. It was one of many sayings that Lollie brought to Chicago from the South. It was a saying



likely born from the image, many years ago, of when photographers disappeared underneath a long, dark, velvet skirt in order to snap a picture.

"Well, what ya' waitin' fa?" Lollie said. "Them potatoes ain't 'gon peel themselves."

Then she walked around the table to the stove and began turning the chicken over in the frying grease. With each piece that she turned, the sizzling sound rose as if it were a geyser. With the turning of each piece Bonita heard that rising and falling sound. She watched her mother as she walked around their small kitchen. It was shaped like a square with a table planted right in the middle. This created one narrow, circular path around the room. Each time she moved, she had to squeeze past the stove or sink or table; it was like trying to cook inside a crowded bus.

Lollie was pretty. She'd always been pretty, even with no makeup, wearing multicolored hair rollers and a stocking cap. Her skin was the color of an oily peanut, and her hair had always been long.

She was always in motion. Like now, Bonita noticed how she turned the chicken, checked the pot of greens on the stove behind the chicken, and checked the cornbread in the oven all at once. All she needed was a set of cymbals strapped to the insides of her knees and she could be a one-woman band.

Bonita lifted her arms as if they weighed one hundred pounds each. She retrieved the first potato from the bag, lifted the knife, and began carving off the skins and about a half inch of potato meat with each stroke.

Lollie turned away from the stove just in time to see the mutilation.

"What are you doin'!" she blasted, and posted a hand on her hip. "I taught you better than that. You cuttin' half the potato away," she said and took the knife, demonstrating to Bonita how it was to be done.

Then they heard a whimper at the side door.

"Now, try again," her mother said, wiping her hands on a dishtowel and heading toward the side door.

It had to be Sweet Pea, their Doberman, ready to come back inside.

Lollie walked down the three steps that led to the landing. She bumped the heavy wooden door with her hip while simultaneously turning the dead-bolt lock. It was a trick they had to perform every time they wanted to open that door. Then she turned the doorknob and opened the door. At first she saw something fluid and black drift past the window of the screen door. She couldn't be sure what it was so she pressed the latch of the door and stuck her head out.

Just then, Bonita, head lowered, biting the side of her lip, was trying hard to peel the potatoes appropriately. She heard her mother gasp. She jumped to her

feet, not knowing whether to drop the knife or bring it with her as a weapon.

"What?!" Bonita said, but her mother didn't answer. "Ma, what!" she yelled, walking towards the door. She could see the back of her mother's housedress and her head popped outside of the door, while she used the screen door as a kind of shield.

"Ma!" Bonita called.

"Go back to peeling the potatoes," Lollie said, turning to Bonita. "Now!" she said with a spurt of anger.

Bonita backed away, almost jumping as her mom yelled. She watched as Lollie slipped out the door into the yard, wearing only a housedress.

Lollie stepped out under the watchful eyes of Sweet Pea. Sweet Pea was a one-year-old Doberman, with big, brown, sad eyes. But now attached to their sweet puppy was a long-legged, black, curly-haired poodle—a standard poodle.

The two dogs stood, conjoined in the middle of the yard that had been beaten bare by the paw tracks of dogs over the years. They moved as one awkward unit, like a tractor trailer in the process of being jack-knifed. They looked to be moving in slow motion. They were butt to butt, each dog facing the opposite direction, like a two-headed monster, their caramel-colored eyes penetrating Lollie in a joint prayer for help.

At the moment, Lollie couldn't imagine how her fearless baby girl Doberman had allowed herself to be mounted by a ragged, mangy poodle, of all things. It was a poodle, but it was just as tall as Sweet Pea. He was thinner than her, had much less muscle mass, and petite little manicured paws. Sweet Pea's paws were like two mounds of ground beef in comparison. Her body was masked in muscles and her black and brown coat hugged the curve of her physique. The two of them, joined in this way, looked like a freak of nature that never should have happened.

This wasn't the first time Lollie had seen this poodle. She recognized him immediately. He came from across the street, the dog that had been roaming freely ever since their new neighbors, Qwame and his parents, had moved in.

"We can't even keep our dogs apart, how are we supposed to . . . ?" she was saying aloud when she heard the rusty whine of the screen door as it opened.

Bonita stepped out, still holding the knife, her mouth opened as big and as round as the moon.

"Mom, what happened?"

"Didn't I tell you to stay inside?"

"But what happened? What happened to Sweet Pea?"

Lollie stood for a moment, the dogs cowering from embarrassment and

silently pleading for a solution. She stood there freezing, feeling the cold earth soak through the bottom of her slippers and her feet turn into blocks of ice.

"Get some water," Lollie said and pointed Bonita towards the house.

"But, Mom," Bonita said, her eyes wildly going from the dogs to her mother and back to the dogs again. It was the oddest thing she'd ever seen in her life, like those pictures of two-headed frogs and people with tumors the size of grapefruits planted on the sides of their necks. She had no regard for obedience; she just couldn't move without an explanation.

"They had . . . relations, OK?" Lollie said.

"What?"

"They had sex, OK? They had sex," Lollie said, her hands pumping up and down. "Now we gotta get 'em unstuck. Go and get some water!" she yelled, and Bonita turned and swiftly mounted the stairs leading up to the door and ran into the kitchen. She didn't fully understand, but felt strangely satisfied that her mother had uttered the word sex.

Soon Bonita reappeared. She'd left the knife in the kitchen and was now armed with a mason jar full of water. She ran over to the dogs and threw the water into the face of the black poodle. The dog shook a few droplets loose from his curly bangs and looked to Lollie for an explanation.

"No, Bonita, not on his head," she said, grabbing her daughter by the arm and pulling her away.

"You said water," Bonita replied with a somewhat bewildered look on her face.

And strangely, it was at this exact moment that Lollie realized that her daughter was the same height as she was. They stood looking directly into each other's eyes.

"Not on his head, baby," Lollie said and began to search her mind for the right words. "When dogs have sex . . . or, ahh, mate, they get stuck together afterwards."

"What?" Bonita said, with such horror reflected on her face, that it was like a giant grizzly bear had just walked into the backyard.

"Don't ask me why, but the male dog . . . expands after it's . . . after it's . . . over."

She looked to Bonita, not knowing how much more she should tell her. Her parents hadn't told her anything. When Lollie got her first period, she was certain that she was dying. There was never a decision made by her and her husband to bring their kids up in the same kind of silence. They never really thought about it. It was just the way things had happened.

"The water is to help shrink his . . . his . . . thing," she said and nodded to herself as if that last sentence was quite an accomplishment.



Bonita just stood there looking at her mother, more shocked now that they were having this conversation than the image of the two conjoined dogs. They had all but forgotten the dogs till the poodle tried to walk away and Sweet Pea began to yelp in obvious pain.

They looked at the dogs, then back at each other. The dogs focused on Lollie's face and the sadness in their eyes played a somber tune.

"Get more water, Bonita. More water!" she yelled. "Use the bucket."

And Bonita jumped into action. She ran back into the house, her beat-up slippers falling off her feet, her ponytail flying behind her.

Lollie looked at the dogs again and they looked back at her; she didn't exactly know what to do, either. She'd grown up on a farm, but it was still odd. She'd seen one dog mount another and begin that innate "replenish the species" sort of humping that seemed to be intuitive to them. She'd also seen dogs in this current state. But she'd never witnessed them actually getting this way. She imagined that after the act was over, the male dog must immediately attempt to dismount. The dismount being a task performed very gingerly as a part of him is still firmly entrenched inside of her. Then once the male dog has all fours back on the ground, they probably stand almost side by side, until the male dog attempts a retreat. It must be at this moment that he realizes that he is somehow tethered to the female.

She couldn't imagine why, in God's name, canine biology caused them to be locked together in this way. As she stood in her yard, trying to look away, she only knew one way to get them apart and that was to use water. It was what her husband did when he found two strays in this condition in their front yard. He just poured a bucket of water over them and like magic, they were separated.

When Bonita returned, Lollie took the bucket, walked over to the dogs and poured the entire bucket between them. The poodle made the first move, walking forward. Sweet Pea yelped as she was being dragged backwards. Then the poodle flinched and Sweet Pea yelped again. The poodle began pulling away, pulling Sweet Pea backwards hollering and crying. He pulled harder, and like a wedding ring being forced up the length of a swollen finger, Sweet Pea was finally released.

The black poodle sat on his tailbone, his head drooped as he watched his canine penis, looking more like a pink, fleshy taper candle, disappear back into his body, like it had automatic recoil.

Sweet Pea walked over to Lollie's side and nudged her hand with her nose. Lollie began to stroke her head while she smiled into her face. Somehow, she didn't want Sweet Pea to think she'd done anything wrong. It was all perfectly natural.

“Wow, baby. Did that hurt?” she asked the brown-eyed dog.

Before she could think any further about how this dog had gotten inside the fence and how to get him out, the poodle turned and in one bounding motion, leaped, curly hair and all, to the top of the fence. He paused for only a second, then sprung forward with his back legs and propelled himself into the front yard. His back paws looked like the hind legs of a black rabbit, leaving cakes of mud on the white painted fence. Once outside the fence, he turned and looked at them like he had gotten away with something.

Lollie herded Bonita and Sweet Pea back into the house. For some reason she'd barely felt the cold. The chicken that had been pleasantly frying in the skillet had begun to burn and smoke, filling the kitchen ceiling. Lollie removed all the chicken from the skillet and methodically turned off every eye of the stove and the oven. Then she walked into the living room and plopped down on the couch.

Bonita had never seen her mother sit so still before.

“Bonita,” she called softly, little more than a whisper.

And Bonita walked from the kitchen door into the living room and sat beside her. They both looked vacant, as if they'd seen a ghost.

“Did you have sex with that boy?” she asked, with no inflection in her voice, no judgment, no scolding.

“No, Mama.”

“OK, baby. Mama believes you,” she said, reaching over and cradling Bonita's head with the palm of one hand, then pressing her child's cheek against her own. “Mama believes you.”

# Scouting

February 14, 1991

Kevin Freese

IT WAS SILENT AS A FUNERAL PROCESSION INSIDE THE HUMVEE. OUTSIDE WAS the desert blanket of Al Harrah, Saudi Arabia. Three privates and a guide sat staring at the dunes piling up all around, pushing off in a crescent shape toward the way of the winds, toward Iraq. This was their first scouting mission; they had to head out before the rest of the troop and find enemy movement, sweep for mines in areas suspected of being hot.

Private Darren Willis sat shotgun, drumming his fingers along the window frame. Mom said he didn't have to join the military for college money. Said that he was African-American and that would do it, but Darren wanted to build character. Back at base, they mostly called him Willis. Whenever he said something that was young, or a bit off line, someone would turn to him and say, "Whatchu talkin' 'bout, Willis?"

Private Alex Lewis was at the wheel. Normally he drove a tank, but the crew had fucked them over pretty bad with the brass, so now they were out here. All of them except their commander. The men up top had decided Sergeant McKay's shit don't stink. Alex wasn't mad at him, though; it was PJ's fault. He's the one who started the fire in Mess Hall B, filling his mouth with gas from a lighter, and igniting it.



Private Peter James sat in back of the Humvee flipping the top of his Zippo. Squeezed next to him was their guide, Bob, who'd been raised in Saudi without any real comfortable tongue of his own—there wasn't much need for talking. He wasn't a native and didn't know the desert of Al Harrah all that well. But the crew couldn't think of him as what he really was, a slave, an under-table deal between the U.S. and Saudi. A gift of sorts. In exchange for protection from Iraq, Saudi granted the U.S. rights to their immigrant servants, like Bob.

He'd come to base in a cargo truck packed with others from the Philippines. Many times these trucks were filled with food, ammo, mechanical supplies, and fresh water. The week before, boxes of stockings had come in, sent from mothers and wives who were oceans and lands away. The nylon was to be stretched over the exhaust pipes on tanks so that lethal chemicals wouldn't enter the cabin during combat. Feeling the cool, soft material sent many men back to their bunkers thinking of home.

The Filipinos were packed forty to a truck, four trucks in all. An open-framed jeep carrying a major led the line of vehicles. He stood pristine in his sharp uniform, a stiff finger directing the driver where to go. The Filipinos had no light camouflage uniform, no Arab wraps to keep the sun's heat away. Instead they wore rags, torn and bloody. Some of them had sweatpants and A-frame undershirts. All their heads were shaved and glistening in the beating sun; it was a cool day, though, only ninety-seven. The Saudis used them for hard labor; working in the oil fields, polishing Cadillacs, and cleaning mansions. An imported third class.

Private Lewis had even seen a Filipino woman wrapped up, rubbing the feet of sheik-like men outside public shacks in town. One fat, bearded man teased a stick along a girl's face as she rubbed. He'd press it into the soft of her cheek, then along the rim of cloth that covered the majority of her face, down a bit to her chest, and poke her as if she were a dead thing. The woman knew better than to react, she just continued running her hands along his brittle feet. When the man caused her shawl to slip down, exposing her mouth, he beat her with the stick, tearing more cloth from her body. The more her skin showed, the more he beat her, until she lay limp in the open street.

Alex moved closer, fists clenched. He knew he wasn't supposed to intervene with national affairs, that he was disobeying direct orders, but he couldn't help it. There was right and there was wrong, and this was wrong. He stood there for a moment, close to the shack, hoping his close presence would make the beating cease. But the man's hand grew harder, his arm faster as he whipped

the girl. "Hey," Alex finally said—nothing better could come out of his mouth.

The fat man laughed from somewhere deep in his belly. He slid the wooden stick underneath his sash and went back inside the shack. Alex dropped the bag of trinkets he'd bought for his wife, Meredith, and son Danny. He gently picked up the limp girl, careful not to place a hand on any open wound. She was no more than fifteen, her skin pale from always being covered. When they got back to base, she in his arms, he brought her to the medical tent. When reporting the incident to his superiors he lied. He said that he didn't know why the girl was in the condition she was; he'd just found her like that.

Alex thought about the girl now as he stormed the desert. That's what the regular scouts called it, stormin' the desert. He thought about that girl and wondered whether his own actions had landed the crew on this assignment, rather than PJ's fireball alone.

PJ held this view even more than Alex. He heard the story of Alex's gallant rescue and thought it was bullshit. They were there to do a fuckin' job, not get involved in diplomatic matters. His eyes stopped roaming the desert and pierced the back of Alex's head. The silence was getting to him; why should this prick ruin his fuckin' time here? He yelled up front to Private Willis: "Hey, Darren, toss me a red."

Willis, who sat shotgun, pulled two cigarettes from his left breast pocket and handed one back to PJ; his hand shook as he placed the other smoke in his mouth. This was either all too much for him, or the desert was just a bumpy ride.

"You all right?" asked Alex, feeling concern for the young private.

"I'm fine," Darren said, lighting the cigarette. His black face had seemed to grow a shade darker with every minute they spent out here.

"Just keep your eyes sharp and we'll be all right. Don't worry," said Alex.

"Hey, Dad, the kid says he's fine," said PJ from the backseat, blowing a puff of smoke. "Bob, you wanna red?" he asked, slapping his hand against their guide's back. None of them wanted to pronounce his real name (Arabello) because it didn't roll off the tongue smoothly, so they just called him Bob, even had dog tags made up with his new name on them. He was an OK guy, didn't do much before this mission but clean their tank and joke around at night with the little English he knew. PJ always responded to anything Bob said with a jab to the ribs and a "Fucking-A right."

The smoke cloud floated into Bob's face and, with a cough, he said, "No smoke." "Fucking-A right!"

Alex whipped his head around. "PJ, you just keep your eyes peeled and be quiet."

"Sure thing," said PJ with a stern look of fuck you on his face.

Before Alex turned back around, Darren yelled, "Stop! Stop," and pitched himself forward in his seat, clutching the dash.

Alex had never heard such alarm in the boy's voice before. He slammed on the brakes, kicking the wheel to the right. At first the tires caught well enough, but as the vehicle turned it started to shake. The wheel vibrated in Alex's hand like several machine gun rounds lighting up. "Hold on," Alex said. A huge sand cloud burst up like a wave, sprinkling the Humvee with tiny granules.

PJ leaned his head forward, in between the two seats. "What the fuck is that?" he asked, pointing ahead.

Twenty yards out stood a wooden cross. It jutted out of the sand all splintered and tilting. A tattered American flag hung from the cross. Spray paint covered the whole thing. It looked as if someone had started out writing something in Arabic but then grew so enraged that they just let paint fly wherever it wanted to go before nailing the flag down.

Private Lewis stood up and raised a pair of binoculars to his eyes for a better look. The nails supporting the flag were rusted and bent, three hammered into each arm of the cross. Sand spackled the whole thing.

"It's a welcome sign is what that is," decided PJ. He snorted in some air and then hocked outside of the Humvee. "Shit, I guess we gotta sweep here."

"Let's radio back to the sarge first," Alex said, sitting back down.

Darren agreed, "Yeah, let's see what the sarge wants us to do."

PJ lifted himself up and shouted down at the two men like they were insane, "We could be sitting on a fucking mine right now! We need to sweep."

"I'm not saying we don't, but we need to contact Sergeant McKay first. This is damn odd."

PJ glanced over at Bob who was huddled up in his seat, avoiding the conversation, knees covering his body. "What if someone picks up our transmission? Or there's some kinda radio frequency bomb underneath that thing that'll go off when we call the base?" said PJ. "We need to sweep," he repeated in a low and confident tone.

"Let me just radio back to base before we do anything. I'm on acting command here, not you." Alex knew he'd conceded to PJ once he said that. A commander, even a temporary one, should never have to remind his crew of the post.

PJ knew the argument was over as well. He grinned, exposing his yellow teeth, and stared at his acting commander. The whole time, Private Willis just stared out at the crucified flag flapping in the increasing wind. "Put your goggles on, Willis," Alex said. "The sand is kicking up."

"Do you wanna live?" asked PJ, flipping his hand out to Alex, palm side up



and pointing. "Yes or no?"

"Yes," Alex said.

PJ aimed his finger at Willis, "Darren, do you wanna live?"

Private Willis just nodded, his eyes not leaving the cross.

"Then let me go out there, man." PJ's glance moved back to Alex. "Bob and I will go out there. You two can just sit here and do whatever."

Alex grabbed the steering wheel with both hands and squeezed like it was PJ's neck. "OK, here's what we'll do. You can go out there and stand by while I radio back to base; there's no such thing as fucking radio frequency mines. I'll have the proper orders from the sarge by the time you're ready to sweep."

"Sure thing, sir," PJ said again.

"Cut the crap," said Alex, but PJ was already out and moving towards the rear of the Humvee. Private Willis was still staring straight ahead unblinkingly. "Private Willis, you keep your eyes on that mountain range over to the south, ya hear me?"

Nothing.

"Darren!"

"Yes, sir, mountain range to the south," he said, wiping the sweat and sand from his forehead.

"That's enemy ground out there, look for movement."

"Yes, sir."

"The sand is grittier than shit after eating a gallon of oatmeal out here, boys," PJ said, clunking around in back, taking stuff out of his hump sack. He pulled out a wide canteen, unscrewed the top and guzzled down most of the water, allowing two solid streams to flow down his chin, onto his camouflaged-tan shirt. After reaching back into his sack, PJ pulled out a small women's cosmetic mirror. He'd found it in one of the crates of nylon stockings. Just for shits and giggles, he'd picked it up along with the stockings needed for their tank. Now it might come in handy, he thought, while dropping it into the left breast pocket of his shirt.

Lifting the sack back to its place, PJ brought his arms up over his head, cracking his knuckles. He bent his neck once to the left, then to the right. Is this what Dad did before going into a hot area? he wondered. PJ took a trip to D.C. before leaving for Saudi. It was the first time he'd visited Dad's name at the Wall. His fingers touched the engraved letters to make sure they were really there. Peter James, Sr. He was among the masses, yet alone with the name. "I love you," PJ whispered before a flash snapped and he turned to see a tourist taking his picture. These fuckin' slants with their cameras and tour buses, he

thought all the way back up to the car. These are graves; there might not be bodies inside the Wall, but, still, these are graves. Have some fuckin' respect.

PJ pulled his sidearm from its holster and checked the ammo. The gun clicked back and snapped into place again. He returned it to its holster. "Bob, give me a hand out here."

Bob climbed out and went to PJ who said, "Here, hold this."

He gave Bob the minesweeper. "Now that's not a golf club so don't swing it," he said. Bob laughed, not sure of anything but that PJ was joking. "Come on, Bob."

The two men walked a few steps away from the Humvee before PJ grabbed the minesweeper from Bob. He clicked it but nothing happened. He shook it, banged it, cursed it, and tried one more time. "Shit, the fucking thing is broken," he yelled back to the jeep.

Alex shook his head, "I can't get a signal!"

"Fuck," PJ looked around in all directions like he was searching for an answer. The desert was beating, and flat. And forever. The only other thing around was a huge dune the size of a whale's back about a football field's length away. "All right, Bob," PJ said after a moment's pause. "I need you to go get me that flag." He punctuated his orders with hand commands to better illustrate. "Get me the flag," he said again, pointing to the ground and then over to the cross.

Bob nodded his head in understanding but would not follow the order. There was a sense of danger when, in this unbroken land, something was found. Bob understood that at the very least, even if he didn't know the meaning of "mine field."

"Yes, Bob, we need your help, yes," PJ said.

Bob looked to the other two men sitting in the jeep; they were his friends, much better than the Saudis. Just last night they taught him how to play football. They gave him chocolate, something he'd never tasted, and it was this one, PJ, who was always joking around with him. He couldn't understand why they would make him do this. "Me no go! Me no go," he said.

PJ pulled Bob close in like he was going to give him a noogie. Bob struggled with arms flailing, but PJ wouldn't let go.

"PJ," Alex said.

"We all take risks out here! It's part of the job," PJ said, struggling with Bob's neck.

Alex's heart beat faster. "But—"

"Bob is one of us, he takes the same risks." PJ held Bob tight.

"No," Alex said, leaning over Darren in order to bring his head closer to

the window frame.

"Look, don't blow it. You already got us stuck out here saving that bitch, Flip. Let us do our job and go home."

Alex shrunk back into the driver's seat and grabbed the radio.

"Me no go! Me no go!" Bob struggled more in the headlock until PJ reached down, keeping one arm around Bob's neck, and pulled out his sidearm. He raised the gun to Bob's head, clicked the safety off, and said, "Look, either you're walking across that desert and bringing me back that flag, or I'm gonna blow your fuckin' head off. Then I'm gonna have to go get the flag myself. What's your choice?"

Bob rested his head motionless in the grip for a moment, tears building in his eyes. He put his fingers to his dog tags and caressed them like a holy rosary. He pushed himself away from PJ and began to walk.

"Wait," PJ said, pulling the cosmetic mirror from his pocket and flipping it open. He kept his gun aimed at Bob in one hand while the other raised the mirror to an angle that would catch the sun. When it hit the right angle, a beam shone out, ending in a circle of brightness in front of Bob. "Follow the light," PJ ordered.

Bob looked down at the reflected dot in the sand and then gazed back at PJ. "Follow?"

"Yes, Bob, fol-low the light," PJ said, walking his fingers in the air to illustrate. Bob's head dipped down as he slowly turned one more time to Alex and Darren. Alex was turning dials on the radio, Darren scanning the mountains.

"Go," PJ ordered, extending his gun arm out more. Bob followed the command and reached one foot out, taking a breath at the same time, then the next foot. A yard in front of him the light jiggled around on the sand. It was always a yard in front of him, leading the way. It didn't move straight though; PJ made sure to cover as much area as possible zigging and zagging the thing around. "It's like a remote control car," he whispered back to Darren.

Alex turned to the radio, trying to pick up even the slightest voice. "Do you read, do you read? Is anybody out there?"

Darren scanned the mountain range, back and forth. Under his lips he muttered, "I'm gonna find you," over and over again.

When Bob was almost to the cross, about three feet away, PJ swung the mirror wide to all sides. Bob stopped. His head followed the little light everywhere on the ground. Just wanting to grab the flag and return to safety, feeling how very close he was to survival or death, he began to cry and shake his head no.

"PJ, cut that fucking shit out," Alex said, grabbing his rifle from behind the



seat and jumping out. "Let him get the flag and come back here."

PJ put his arms to his hips, the gun nonchalantly pointing toward the ground. "What the hell is your problem?"

Alex moved closer, wanting to walk right up and punch that pointy head of PJ's right into the ground. "My problem is you're abusing your authority and mine."

"Whatever, man," spat PJ.

"I'm going to kick your ass if you don't get your act together," Alex said.

Willis shouted to both of them from the Humvee, "I think I just saw something."

"Man, there's nothing out there to see, that's not even Iraq. Our commander here was just trying to keep you busy."

"Shut up, PJ," said Alex.

"Fuck you!"

"Get back in the jeep." Alex cocked his rifle at PJ's stomach. Bob took advantage of the distraction, going right up to the cross and grabbing the flag. A proud smile ran across his face as he held up the flag and shouted, "Awwmerical!"

PJ grunted a laugh at this and looked back to Alex, like, "You ain't shit, but I'll play along." He tossed the compact into the sand and holstered the gun.

"Head back," Alex said. PJ slowly returned to the Humvee. "Come," Alex ordered Bob, pointing to the ground, "get back here."

Bob cautiously walked back through the suspected mine field. Alex waited for Bob. He slung the rifle over his shoulder and leaned down to inspect the ground; there was a hump in the sand right next to his foot. The closer he got to it, the more it smelled like a dirty animal cage full of shit and piss. Underneath the upraised sand was something white.

"Snake eggs," said Private Willis, dangling his arms out of the window frame, a cigarette burning in his hand. "The snakes bury them in the sand to keep them away from the heat."

Still bent down, Alex gave Willis a sideways glance, like how the hell did you know that?

"I did a report on desert snakes last year for science," Darren said, taking a drag from the cigarette.

"Fuckin' snakes," Alex said and kicked some more sand over the nest trying to bury the smell. He remembered when he was young and played in a sandbox, packing sand into architectural shapes, bucket-like castles. Alex packed the sand in real tight now, sliding more and more over the eggs until he heard a crunch. It was a loud mechanical noise, nothing like the cracking of an egg. Alex looked down and saw the head of a metal spike exposed at the center of

his footprint. "Oh, shit."

Alex had heard mines going off inches from his ears during basic training. They simulated situations just like this, but now it was more real and much louder. A huge boom shook the ground, like an airliner storming right through Alex's ear canal. The blast pushed him backwards, knocking him off his feet. Just behind the boom were shouts and screams, PJ yelling, "What the hell did ya do?"

Clumps of sand, not just granules, flew up from the ground and slapped Alex on the head, scraping against his face. His hearing began to fade as PJ shouted, "Get the masks, get the fucking masks!" Alex tried focusing his eyes. All he could see was the sun through clouds of dust and smoke, and it was only then that he realized he'd been knocked off his feet. He tried to lift himself back up, but his legs collapsed like jelly and he was back down on the ground again.

Dropping the flag, Bob made his way over to Alex. He reached his hands under Alex's back and knees in order to lift him up. The muscles on Bob's neck strained as he tried to pick him up; he let out a grunt and then released. Alex had been training for months, lifting weights, running, getting the proper nutrients. Bob had lived on rice and shit-brown water for a year. There was nothing he could do for Alex but move him with words. "It's a lot of smoke, no fire," said Bob. "No fire! Very dangerous out here!"

The silence in Alex's ears had been replaced by a steady ringing, but he could see Bob's lips moving. Though Alex didn't hear the words, he, too, knew there was no fire; there was no part of his body that was burning. The mine wasn't meant to kill us, just give our position away, thought Alex.

He sheltered his eyes from the sun and looked over to the Humvee. Darren was on the radio shouting and flailing his arms; PJ was grabbing the masks from the rear cargo box. He fumbled the four masks trying to carry them like a baby, then stopped to pick them up.

"Get out," yelled Alex, lifting himself up with the support of Bob's shoulders. He was amazed that his voice suddenly felt hoarse like the whole desert was caught up in his lungs. "Get out of here," he yelled again, but neither Darren nor PJ heard him.

Alex's ears were still ringing when the first shot was fired, so he couldn't hear it, but he knew where it came from when Darren's body suddenly slouched over in its seat. The second bullet hit the windshield, spreading glass and blood over Darren's face.

Bob hit the ground, bringing Alex all the way down again, too. Alex's hearing was returning to the point that he could hear the shots and pinging of their impact on the Humvee's body. It wasn't until PJ pulled out his sidearm

and aimed at the dune that Alex knew from where they were being attacked. Alex could see the sparks of gunfire and little specks that were people. Then, from behind the dune, a tank's long turret appeared. It bounced and rotated until aimed. Bob saw the tank as well and mustered all his strength to drag Alex away from the main target of the gunfire, the Humvee.

Alex screamed out to PJ, who had forgotten all about the gas masks, instead focusing all his attention on the immediate danger. His sidearm had run out of ammo and he now used the gun atop the vehicle to fire at the enemy tank. The shots were like spit spraying into a waterfall, accomplishing nothing.

Bob dragged Alex in sporadic jolts of energy, pulling him by the wrists. He was heading them towards the cross, the only cover in the desert plane, ducking to avoid gunfire as he moved. As the tank fired, Alex yelled one more time for PJ, but it was too late. The Humvee lit up, burning sky high. Bits of metal and flesh flew everywhere. One sharp piece landed in Bob's neck, spraying blood over Alex's face and dropping the dead man onto him.

A sharp, internal, pain spread out from Alex's right knee. He looked down and saw a piece of shrapnel dug into his pant leg.

The gunfire didn't stop; it continued, now closer than before. Alex dragged himself nearer the cross with Bob's body lying on top of him. Every time a bullet hit Bob's body, Alex felt the lifeless body jump. He could not help but feel relieved it was not him getting shot. The sound of gunfire became clearer; the hissing, the banging, the cracking of wood—he was almost at the cross, he on his stomach, Bob face down on his back like a turtle shell.

At the foot of the cross Alex lay, propping Bob's body up on the wood like a sail at sea. The dead body and cross weren't perfect, but they were better shelter than the open desert ground. The shots seemed to shower down from every direction. A feeling of complete helplessness took hold of Alex. He tried not to think about Meredith and Danny back home, probably sitting on the couch watching news of the war, hoping to see him send an I-Love-You message on CNN or VH1. He tried not to think of his mother and the hug she gave him before he left. "I'm so proud of you," she'd said. "Now be safe."

Sand whipped up into Alex's eyes as a bullet hit nearby. He felt his heart pound inside his ears. Bob's body dropped back to the ground after getting shot once more. Another bullet grazed against Alex's arm, slicing open a moist wound. This was like being tied down and whipped, thought Alex. He wanted to get up and punch, fucking punch someone, but that isn't possible when you are tied down and being whipped. Splinters of wood sprang from the cross with more gunfire and landed in Alex's eyes until they were closed shut and stinging. This was the end.



The enemy continued their potshots, trying to destroy the cross and the man under it one splinter at a time. The hatch to the tank flipped open. Two soldiers squeezed themselves in the opening and watched with binoculars as the others fired. Not one of them heard the chopper off in the distance behind the fire of their guns.

It circled around from behind them, and by the time the two men in the tank had taken notice and returned to their positions, it was too late. The whole thing lit up with the one-two dropping of missiles. The chopper's gun sent one enemy soldier running off on fire, lighting up his gun until he dropped. Soon there was no tank left, no enemy, not even the big dune. In less than a minute's time, all that remained was fire, smoke, and flat sand. The plume of smoke from the tank rose high and mixed with the smoke cloud rising from the remains of the Humvee.

The louder the explosions got, the more certain Alex became that he would die. A horrible wind kicked up around him, caking even more soot and sand into his eyes. The burst of air lifted up the hair on his head. He could faintly hear the chopper now, and that was all. Two hands reached down to pick him up, and, unsure to whom they belonged, Alex screamed, "Fucker!"

Voices came from what sounded like the inside of a tunnel. "He's hit in the knee and shoulder," shouted an American voice. It was like Alex's ear canal had just been stretched a thousand times long. "Bring him on," came another voice.

Alex's eyes were forced shut by all the stinging shit in them, but he could feel everything; his feet dragging along the ground, the pressure of another set of arms lifting him up by the pits, heat everywhere, soft, melting heat, and his back hitting metal, then his feet clunking against a hard edge. And Alex could now hear everything, too. He heard the chopper's swooshes, and he knew he was safe. There was the zipping of bags, static followed by transmissions, crossfire, ringing, more voices, Velcro ripping apart, the clinking of metal on metal. All the sounds mixed together until Alex felt them lift off the ground and a sharp, sterile pain hit his vein.

# My Mother's Legs

Kelly Reiss

MY MOM'S TOENAILS ARE REALLY GROSS. IT LOOKS LIKE SHE HASN'T CUT THEM since 1983. In the turquoise flip-flops we stopped for at Wal-Mart this afternoon, her feet look a thousand years old, but really they've only walked forty-seven years' worth of miles.

The elevator pings on B, and the doors let us out on the level with the pool. The chlorine smell leads us down the corridor to the steamed glass entrance to the swim room. Walking with my mother I always take a couple quick steps forward. Wait. And then a couple half-steps backwards to compensate for my mother's slow and steady, steady and slow; I can never allow my own feet to set myself at her pace. I pull the handle of the door, and my glasses fog up before I even step inside. The thick air moves in and out of my lungs like breathing wisps of cotton candy. I raise my eyebrows and my glasses fall below eye level. I find one frosted table near the mandatory shower stall and the posting of pool rules (Rule #1: Swim at Your Own Risk). I put down my mother's beach towel and my magazine on the table to clean my glasses with the sleeve of my sweater. My mother shuffles over to the table, takes off her awful bright orange cover-up (the kind that's like a big T-shirt with the fringe on the bottom), and steps out of her flip-flops. Her toenails don't look so bad

without 20/20 vision.

I put on my glasses and plop down in the rubber lounge chair with my celebrity magazine. But my eyes can't focus on the pictures of beautiful people on the glossy pages as I catch a glimpse of my mother tiptoeing down the stairs at the shallow end of the pool.

My mom used to be gorgeous, better looking than I will ever be. Her prime was at the peak of miniskirt popularity. And from what my aunts (but never my father) have told me, my mom sure could wear a miniskirt. Whenever she complains of it being cold in the house my dad says to her, "It's comfy." Whenever she complains of it being cold outside he coughs, "Ahem, *Love Story*." Then he giggles to himself slightly at this citation of the time during their dating period when he and my mom stood outside the Lake Theater for two hours in the dead of winter waiting in line to see *Love Story*. My dad didn't like the movie, and my mom had been wearing a miniskirt with high heels.

Back then she had long brown hair; some might romantically have called it chestnut. It was ironed straight as a board, but, on the days when her high school gym class had swimming, she would bring a short blond bobbed wig to change into. I would have liked to seen that.

I push my eyes back down to the page I wasn't reading. My eyes are drawn back to my mother, the lone swimmer that snowy night in Pennsylvania. It is taking her forever to get in that goddamned pool. I wish that she would just cut the theatrics and dive right in, instead of carefully bending to dab at the water with her hand. The water had to be warm; it was a million degrees in the poolroom and my Christmas sweater was becoming too much for me to handle. I hadn't brought my swimsuit because I don't own one.

My eyes slide across the glass of the water until they hit the backs of my mother's knees and move up to her exposed thighs. Something has waged war on my mother's miniskirt legs and won the battle, cementing its victory by chunking layers of fat and other flesh over the pillars of perfection that had once stood there. Visible curdles of cellulite and grape-jelly clumps of varicose veins make a topographic map of the war zone. I get up quickly and turn toward the door to escape a strange déjà vu sensation that I am looking into some kind of time machine mirror.

I get up to turn on the hot tub, as I always like to do at hotel pools. The jets start up, and some of the tension dissolves into the whirring of water on water.

I turn around to see that Mom had finally made it down the pool stairs and is on her way to the deep end, in more ways than one, I laugh to myself. I plop back down in the chair, as my mother performs a pathetic version of the



breaststroke, struggling to keep her head above water as she pulls forward.

I call over to her, "So, Mom, tell me again who are these people in the wedding?"

"Kelly, we've been over this a hundred times," she answers, turning over on her back, moving back towards me using only her legs.

"I just want to be sure, it's your cousin Karen, right?"

"Mmhmm. And the groom is Steven. And your great Aunt Mary and Uncle Ed will be there, and I'm not sure who else." She is now kneeling in front of the stairs looking at me from the pool.

"And we're going as the representatives from Illinois?"

"We're going because I want to see my cousin get married, and so should you."

"Mom, where are your glasses?"

"Back in the room."

"Can you see anything?"

"I can see enough." My mom's vision went bad after a bad case of the measles when she was thirteen. She had a high fever for two weeks, and she was lucky that all she lost was some eyesight. I've never seen a photo of my mother wearing glasses before I was born. My father didn't even know that she wore glasses until after they were engaged.

After a few more weak laps, my mother gets out of the pool and patters over to the hot tub. I catch a glimpse of her legs. At this sight I realize that I was the one who had waged the war on my mother's legs. Hell, it must have been our first battle since I wasn't even born yet, a foreshadowing of things to come.

Her first pregnancy had been fine, and my brother came out easily. But when I was conceived, something had erupted in her body. She had to be bedridden for a few months because of recurring blood clots in her legs. My mother had to stay in the hospital for surgery after my birth, as the doctors tried to repair some of the damage my rebellious fetus had done to her legs. My mother cried and begged the doctor not to send her baby home without her mother. He sent me home anyway. A week later my mother was released, but it would be months before she was back on her feet again. My mother gained sixty pounds during the pregnancy, and is still trying to lose the weight, but her driver's license still says 5'8" 115 lbs., her dimensions before I was born.

"Kelly, where are you going?" she says to my back.

"I'm gonna get a soda."

"You know I don't like you to go anywhere alone in hotels."

I slide through the steamed door and walk away from the chlorine. I glance back over my shoulder, expecting to see my mother peeking out of the door,

watching me go down the hallway. But she's not there. The pop machine is just past the elevators. I force-feed it a crumpled dollar bill. Automatically I push *Diet Coke*, something conditioned into my head for years by my mom and supermodels. I pop the can open and take a long chug. I'm not even thirsty, and this stuff really does taste bad. I place the rest of the can in a potted plant next to the machine. I turn back down the hallway now, past the elevator again, and watch my finger trace the groove on a strip of wood in the middle of the wall, dividing hunter green paint from burgundy-flecked wallpaper.

At the steamed glass door, my finger drops. My eyes challenge their strict training and look squarely at my full frontal reflection trapped in the condensation on the other side of the glass. I quickly push the sleeves of my thick sweater down to thin out my arms and shoulders, pull my mangy long hair away from my face, and then try in vain to fluff it up. No, I can never wear these pants again; they look like garbage. Is that really how wide my hips are? Get over it, I tell myself. But I'm a two-headed turtle, a freak, and I can't stop staring at my unfamiliar body double in the glass.

This reminds me of the way I like to look at myself in dark windows. On buses, trains, that round little one at the foot of Grandma's stairs, in his car when he used to drive me home at night. All of the secret, floating Kellys, unattached to reality and the rest of my body. They appear all the time when I need them, looking at me and smiling like they know.

Behind my reflection I hear the rush of the whirlpool fade away. I hear nothing else. I picture my mom sinking slowly, as helpless as a baby in bathwater, into the pool and then rising slowly to the surface with her face down. Floating, her body is spread wide in the center of the pool, her skin turning as blue as her varicose veins.

I will run and dive into the pool, turn her over, remove the wet strands of hair from her still-pretty blue face, and circle her shoulders with my arms, heavy and wet from the sweater she gave me for Christmas. I will call for help, maybe even yell, "Lifeguard!" But then I will look up and realize it clearly states in the red lettering that we are swimming at our own risk.

I open the door, the Kelly in the glass vanishes, and my glasses steam up.

# A Woman's Dream: The Klan Strikes

Cynthium Johnson-Woodfolk

THERE WAS A BLACK DARKNESS THAT SPREAD ITSELF SO DENSELY ACROSS THE expanse of the field that, when she pushed it, her hands seemed to be enveloped in black sky and prickly-edged stars oozing through the spaces between her fingers. She felt the thick, humid, Georgia heat drawing in on her, smothering her like a large blanket, cutting her breath into segmented pants, her chest heaving like an asthmatic's. When she ran she looked like a ghost, a frightened, transparent figure running with the moon over her shoulder, darting frantically across the field. The sparkling white image of her cottage faded farther and farther behind, and she could no longer see the green of the grass in the yard, nor the row of colorful wildflowers that had taken her years to get right, a combination daintily decorating and edging the sides of the walk. They reached from the open gate of the picket fence up the stairs to the azure and crimson oval-shaped stained-glass window in the middle of the door.

The porch's pillars were wrapped in green spiraling leaves; she saw them no more as the embodiment of her unborn children, the ones she had dreamed she'd one day have, two small brown-skinned girls and a curly-haired caramel skinned boy, their spritely faces fading and growing farther away with each step she took. Her white cotton gown flowed behind her as she ran, billowing like



fine, airy silk as the wind wrapped the dress around her, revealing the shape of her hour-glass figure. She tangled her hair in her hands as she searched for a way to escape.

In the distance she could hear wild horses neighing, the pounding of hoofs and gallop of horses raring back on their hind legs, kicking and spinning and turning in circles on the grass. Their masters “hee yah’ed!” in wicked saber voices that sliced sections of the darkness and divided it like a big ol’ pie, revealing the hatred and fury in which they rode, all ten or twelve of them, their flaming torches hoisted high above the points of their white hoods.

“Hee yah!”

*Jeeeeesssus! Lawd, sweet Jeeeeeesus!*

Sweat poured down her forehead and stained her face, drawing glossy tracks beneath her eyes as she ran blindly by the light of the moon, violently swinging her arms to her sides, feeling for something that could guide her through the night, something that could tell how far she’d gone. In the day she knew the land by heart, had bragged to herself about how she could find her way through it even if she was blind. She’d find the fragrant fresh-baked bread scent that was always coming from the back of Johnson’s general store when she ran a mile south and the pungent fetid odor of sun-baked manure that’d become characteristic of the McKinnery farm on the other side just north of the field. She could find them then but couldn’t find them now. She smelled nothing but the grazing rush of grass and night and hot humid air, all tugging but giving her nothing to hold onto.

“Hee yah!”

Her feet were bare, and from the stinging whips of the bladed Georgia grass, small, slanted, bleeding incisions were sliced on her ankles and legs. The light of the moon shone over her shoulder, and it only lit a section of the way. She saw shadowed limbs of towering trees and dark green patches of grass that stretched all around for miles and miles and miles.

“Hee yah!”

The sound grew nearer, closed in from behind and in the thickness of the heat, in the whisk of the rattling *shhhh shhhh* sway of the grass whipping furiously at her legs, she heard screams and shouts of “Kill that nigger!” as she ran with her head turned back, searching the darkness for the voices screaming through the night. A high-pitched squeal of the wind whisked past her ears and mixed with the frantic, desperate tone of her own voice, her eyes deceiving, giving her nothing but orange torches and floating white hoods with no eyes riding in the blackness to see.

“God, help me! God, please help me!”

She tripped and fell face first into a bush. The leaves and limbs jabbed into her face and eyes, and she could no longer see the light of the moon but heard the slowing gallop of the horses trampling close behind her outstretched legs, the vibrations rumbling under her stomach, quivering in the ground.

“Whoa!”

Her eyes and face stung, throbbed, a mad drummer’s drum, as sprayed breath from the horses nostrils misted upon her legs. The men yanked reins and turned small circles on their horses, hoisting their torches high as she scrambled to get to her feet, which gave away underneath her as she slipped on the grass.

“Done caught us a nigger!” one of them shouted. “One ’nem educated ones!” He continued poking the torch close to her face so that the heat caused her to rear back. “Caught her teachin’ up dere on the McKinnery farm, talking to other niggars, tellin’ ’em ’bout bettering themselves.”

“Well . . .,” another chimed in, circling on the horse as she continued to struggle in the grass, “guess they gon’ have to do that on they own, ain’t they now?”

And another punched his baby finger under his hood and sucked as if he was picking his teeth, other hand resting on his thigh.

“Let’s hang her high!”

She felt hands reach down and grab her, cup her roughly underneath the arms and pull her to her feet, yanking her like a doll through the dark.

She hadn’t done anything. Hadn’t taught anyone anything. Had heard the yelps screaming over the quiet of the night and seen the light of their torches from her window when she was blowing out the candle to go to bed. She’d sneaked down the stairs when the yelps grew nigh and ran out the back when a torch flew through the downstairs porch window. Did nothing but live and be black, live and be black.

His nails dug into her arms and kneaded her skin like it was bread dough, dragging her fighting and kicking body by the horse’s side. She swiveled furiously in his grasp as she struggled to get loose, the light of the torch a seething, bright-orange fire in front of her face. Her eyes caught the shadow of a dangling noose swung over a tree limb above a growing bonfire.

Her head jerked back and forth, heart pounding wildly, as she was lowered to the ground and pulled kicking through the grass by arms too strong for her to fight, her legs too weak to run.

They yanked her arms up, snatched her as if she was nothing more than a piece of cloth, and passed her between them, each one tugging more violently on her arm so that she felt it when it snapped and slipped from its socket, the pain too intense to battle. And they knew as she knew that it was useless for her to fight, her arm like her voice swinging desperately in the air, unable to land a hard blow.





# Colophon

*HAIR TRIGGER 26* WAS PRODUCED ON A DELL OPTIPLEX GX240 WITH INTEL Pentium 4 CPU (1.70 GHz) using QuarkXPress 5.0. The cover and photo pages were produced on an Apple Macintosh G5 using Quark 6.0 and Adobe Photoshop. They were submitted to Sheridan Books, Ann Arbor, Michigan, camera-ready on Imation 100MB Zip Disks for printing. Images were scanned using a Fuji 5260 drum scanner. Once the final size of the images was determined, they were sized and saved at 300 DPI for output using a 200 LPI screen.

On the cover, the book title is in handwritten text. All other copy is Franklin Gothic Demi. On the first photo page, the text is Franklin Gothic Book. The headers for front matter pages and the titles of each story and essay are in handwritten text.

Body copy is Bembo 11 point. Author names are in Franklin Gothic Book Compressed 14 point. Page footers are in Franklin Gothic Book Compressed 9 point.

Paper stock for cover is 12 PT Carolina C-1-S. Paper stock for photo pages is 100# Sterling Gloss Text. Print specs for photo pages are four-color process plus overall aqueous satin coating. Print specs for cover are four-color process and one PMS color with matte laminate.









## ABOUT HAIR TRIGGER AND THE STORY WORKSHOP APPROACH

GOLD CROWN AWARD TO *HAIR TRIGGER 25*, COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY SCHOLASTIC PRESS ASSOCIATION (CSPA), 2004 NATIONAL COMPETITION

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FROM JUDGE'S COMMENTS, CSPA 1990 NATIONAL COMPETITION, IN WHICH *HAIR TRIGGER 12* WON A SILVER CROWN AWARD

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